

**WIRE WALKING:  
THE WORK OF SHONAGH KOEA  
1987 - 1996**

---

**A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Arts in English  
in the  
University of Canterbury  
by  
Anne Herbison**

---

**University of Canterbury  
1997**

4581  
.K765  
.Z6  
.H538  
1997

## ABSTRACT

The title of this thesis comes from an observation made by Norman Bilborough in *Landfall* (Spring 1993, p. 329):

Shonagh Koea is a wire walker - and it's a deceptively high wire.  
Some nights she makes it across, and you have to admire her  
talent; other times she falls abysmally into the net.

Using the metaphor of wire walking, this study demonstrates that Koea's work is a precarious balancing act in that it attempts to balance comedy with seriousness, and fantasy with realism. When compared with the fiction of serious writers the escapism of Koea's novels, in particular, is evident, mainly in the way the predicaments of the protagonists are resolved. Thus, the first chapter deals with how Koea's work differs from that of other writers and how it departs from the general direction of serious contemporary women's fiction. The second chapter examines how the work uses caricature, and how it repeats the marginalised widow character, who is constructed as a romantic heroine requiring rescue, and whose concerns the narrative attempts to persuade the reader to share. Excesses in the language and a tongue-in-cheek narrative tone, reinforce the view that the work is constructing a two-dimensional reality and this is demonstrated in the third and fourth chapters which examine Koea's use of language and her story telling, or narrative, techniques. The study concludes that the contradictions between comedy and seriousness and between realism and fantasy inevitably upset the balance in the work when the narrative attempts to assert fantasy over realism while requiring the reader's serious consideration of the romantic heroine.

-- -- -- OOO -- -- --

## ABBREVIATIONS IN THE TEXT

The titles of Koea's novels are in the first instance written in full. Thereafter, they may appear abbreviated as follows:

WWNWH	<i>The Woman Who Never Went Home and Other Stories</i>
TGT	<i>The Grandiflora Tree</i>
SHBR	<i>Staying Home and Being Rotten</i>
FRBC	<i>Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight</i>
SMD	<i>Sing to Me, Dreamer</i>
WBV	<i>The Wedding at Bueno Vista</i>

## PRINCESS ALICE THE INCREDIBLE LADY GYMNAST

Princess Alice the Incredible Lady Gymnast  
 constructed a flying machine  
 of surpassing grace and lightness  
 out of shells & feathers & fishing line  
 which made a fitting carriage.  
 Strapping on her flying helmet made of mirrors  
 she asked help of the wind  
 in this her one & only exploit  
 to be undertaken solo  
 with full & due recognition of the altitudes  
 & consequent danger involved.  
 The wind                      being honest  
 made no promises  
 but agreed that the desire for flight  
 necessitates some acceptance of risk  
 the penalty for infringement of the laws of gravity  
 being as everyone knows

summary  
 translation  
 into air.

Nevertheless she took off successfully  
 & flew a little way  
 until a cloud of birds forced her down  
 in unfamiliar country  
 where a parliament of trees  
 condemned her for alienation from earth  
 & sentenced her forthwith  
 to dissolution

(Now you  
 see her

now you

## INTRODUCTION

In the last decade Shonagh Koea has published six books: two volumes of short stories and four novels. During this time she has attracted considerable interest and her work has achieved high sales figures, so that while her first book received only a few reviews, her last four have been reviewed in all the major newspapers and magazines (see Appendix 1 for an overview). The reviews are often lengthy and have on several occasions been accompanied by feature articles. She has featured twice on the cover of *Quote Unquote*, and on two in-depth interviews on National Radio (the second being a continuation of the first which proved to be too short to cover all the aspects of her life and work her interviewer, Brian Edwards, wished to investigate), as well as at numerous book events, such as the Listener Women's Book Festivals and the Readers and Writers Weeks. Her third novel, *Sing to Me, Dreamer*, was nominated for the 1995 New Zealand Book Awards. The novels all feature a central female character who has recently lost her husband, and are about what this change means to her personally and in the wider sphere of her immediate society. A number of the short stories have similar characters, or are similarly about a person's marginalisation in some way, or attempt to establish a sense of self and of purpose in a world in which obstacles are placed in the way of the naive and unwary. The characters inhabit confined domestic worlds and isolated neighbourhoods or small towns, and place great emphasis on interiors, gardens and material objects for a sense of self and wellbeing. The work of Koea is distinctive, not so much for its subject matter, but for the way in which the stories are told; the narrative circles around on itself until a full picture is revealed, and the language is unusual for contemporary work; often using rather obscure vocabulary for effect and achieving a tone which can be decorous and polite, but also satirical and ironic. It is also often very humorous.

A number of the reviews discuss the relationship between style and content in Koea's work. Nowhere is this more vehemently expressed, however, than in Norman Bilborough's review of the second collection of short stories, *Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight*. While most of the reviews discuss Koea's distinctive style in terms ranging from "sumptuous bath of prose"<sup>1</sup> to "wonky, endearing kind of poetry",<sup>2</sup> and while there is mention of excesses in the writing, most of the reviewers claim the work is redeemed by the wit, satire and humour it contains. For Bilborough, however, the degree of contrivance places the collection (and, one senses, her work as a whole) beyond serious contemplation, despite the stories which he finds praiseworthy. He refers to Koea as a "wire walker", whose work deals in "contrivance", which is a

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Morrissey, "Romance with a splash of wit", *Sunday Star Times*, Oct. 30, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Iain Sharp, "Minnie Mouse plays Anna Karenina", *New Zealand Books*, Dec. 1992, p. 7.

"dangerous tool" that makes the "poorer stories phoney and unreal". He notes that she's been referred to as a "quirky writer", but asserts that her quirkiness fails her, in that in order to succeed in the stories it "must have a kind of oblique or unhinged relevance to the story. It must have, at least, some partially revealed connection to it...", and goes on to comment that her storylines are not a strong point. In his words, she "loves her decorative diversions, and the reader can quickly tire of them", her distaste for life becomes "downright malevolence", the ambivalence toward her characters is unresolved, and further, there is a "high, artificial pitch" in these "mannered stories about manners", a "vein of unreality", a "straining to impress".<sup>3</sup> There are echoes of these concerns in other reviews, but Bilborough sees the risks Koea takes (the "wire walking") as undermining the credibility of the work. He is critical of what, in her writing, is seen as an achievement by others, for where he sees contrivance, Jane Stafford, Ian Gordon, Graeme Lay and Elizabeth Caffin, to name a few (the last three with reference to the same work) see deliberate constructions, craft, irony and control. The conflict in the criticism raises fundamental questions about the relation between "contrivance" and realism, or between style and content. As Bilborough contends, there is a lot of contrivance in Koea's work; that is what its storytelling depends on. However, the viability of the work, as art, depends on a delicate balancing act between style and substance.

In beginning to explore the issues inherent in Koea's work, Bilborough's "wire walking" metaphor is useful. In a sense, her work parallels the circus career of Margaret, the main character in the third novel, *Sing to Me, Dreamer*. Margaret does not walk the high wire herself, but stands on the platform high above the crowd and releases the trapezes for the artistes, Violet and Rollo, at carefully timed intervals. Similarly, Koea's stance can be seen as maintaining a distance from the stuff of serious art, while claiming a place as a glittering, yet precise, diversion to one side. She becomes a combination of ring master and main attraction, both allowing the action to proceed by releasing the trapezes and claiming attention for her own particular skills. While Violet wears a tiara made of glass, Margaret wears a "maharanee's diadem with the cabochon sapphires so you could recognise me by my jewels" (169), and so Koea is asserting that she is the "genuine article", for if we look closely we will see her true value. Koea, therefore, seems aware that her work is different, but that it is making a claim for a recognition of its worth on its own terms.

That the work is unlike the writing of her contemporaries seems to be part of Bilborough's difficulty with it since, from his criticism, it would seem that he, and probably most (particularly New Zealand) writers, would avoid walking such a "high wire" in their own writing at all costs. While Shelagh Duckham Cox makes a link between the current fashion for Jane Austen and the content of Koea's work,<sup>4</sup> the fashion among the literati seems to be much more for a gritty and realistic portrayal of

<sup>3</sup> Norman Bilborough, *Landfall*, Spring 1993, pp. 329-331.

<sup>4</sup> Shelagh Duckham Cox, *Landfall*, Spring 1996, pp.323-324.

late twentieth century life. However, some writers, such as Anne French and Peter Wells, show approval:

I like Koea's writing because she dares to be several things New Zealand writers know they should never be; her writing is dense, playful, rich, fruity and slightly Anglican around the edges. Like a good Christmas pudding, it suggests glazed fruit soaked in good alcohol, and maybe some coinage of dubious ancestry.<sup>5</sup>

and:

There is altogether too much nasty, depressing writing out in the world, Koea seems to have said. 'Life's too short. Let's see what we can do with a little sensuous frippery and whimsy. Sit down, and I'll tell you a story...'<sup>6</sup>

Koea's work can be seen as an eclectic mix of styles, but ultimately it is distinctive, both carefully crafted and with a touch of derring-do. Thus, an investigation of how her work is similar and dissimilar to the work of her contemporaries, and how this helps illuminate the nature and the concerns of her work, particularly considering its mixed reception, would seem appropriate. Such an investigation will be the purpose of the first chapter, which will examine how Koea's choice of themes, notably the marginalisation of the woman-alone character, is often similar to that of other writers, yet her treatment of the themes reveals her quite different perspective. Koea has been compared with writers from Jane Austen to Fay Weldon. In addition to these two writers, contrasts and comparisons will be drawn between her and a number of contemporary, mainly New Zealand, writers.

Koea has been described as a "stylist" by more than one reviewer, and this gives a useful perspective for the second chapter, for the term "stylist" has connotations of contrivance and artifice, like the world of the circus, and it indicates that an artist so described is highly conscious of her craft. Koea is certainly careful and particular in her choice and arrangement of words in order to convey mood, aesthetic effect, the personality of the narrator, and a particular way of looking at reality.<sup>7</sup> Her vocabulary provides interest for its self-conscious use of archaic and arcane (incidentally one of her favourite) words, which add an air of pedantry and particularity. She also frequently makes use of alliteration. Her sentences are often constructed in interesting ways which do not always sound quite correct, and yet add an air of poetry and individuality and contribute to the mood required. Imagery plays an important part in her novels and short stories, particularly in adding an atmosphere to the character's environment which echoes the character's state of mind, and is often highly emotional.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Wells, "You must read this", *New Zealand Books*, Dec. 1992, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Anne French, "Tenpins flying", *Listener*, 17 Sept., 1994, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> Lee T. Lemon, *A Glossary for the Study of English*, New York, OUP, 1971, p. 64.

There is also a decorous tone to the language of the narrative, echoing that of the heroines of her novels. The dialogue is worth investigating for what it reveals about Koea's craft, particularly her characterisation. Indeed, it is in the language that the greatest risks occur in Koea's work, the greatest "showiness" is exhibited here. It has been described variously as "overblown"<sup>8</sup> and as "beautifully crafted".<sup>9</sup> This dichotomy allows for the argument to show strengths and weaknesses, where balance is achieved and where it is not, and how, over all, the accomplishment of equilibrium, and the failure to accomplish it, contributes to the success or failure of the work. Does the degree of "contrivance" undermine the work, or is it in fact what the work is about?

Chapter Three will look at a particularly striking aspect of the content of Koea's work. It will examine the repetition of character type, specifically the widow or woman-alone, and how this helps to elucidate the concerns of the work. Each successive novel can be viewed as a development or variation on the possibilities for that character, who also appears in several of the short stories. Does the repeated use of such a character amount to an obsession, as Elizabeth Newton claims,<sup>10</sup> or is this character revealing more about a particular human situation each time she appears in successive work? Obvious autobiographical links are unavoidable in a consideration of the characterisation. Kevin Ireland refers to Koea as "the most consistently autobiographical of our fiction writers",<sup>11</sup> claiming that she transforms real life experience in her fiction. This adds another dimension to the place of this particular character in the very particular work of Shonagh Koea. Whether this choice of character and this way of presenting her makes a suitable choice of subject or an unusual and ineffectual heroine will be discussed. It is worth considering what Koea means us to take from this character type. Koea seems to ask us to regard the character seriously even when the comic treatment and fairytale imagery suggest that the narrative is not taking her seriously. It is in this respect that Koea really "walks the high wire" yet, although serious engagement with the protagonists is not always possible, we do champion their cause because their stories are told so beguilingly.

Koea's strength is in her storytelling, and this will be the subject of the final chapter. She has something of the skill of Sheherazade in telling a story in the hope that it will save her from literary doom. Furthermore, she uses many elements of traditional storytelling: the movement from chaos to order, the happy ending with its sense of justice in the outcome, the championing of the heroines. There is also an awareness of the elements of theatre, charade, pantomime, melodrama and masquerade in the stories, and in fact Koea uses these very terms in her work. The ridiculous may be used to advance the story, and so the elephant becomes the means for Koea to allow

---

<sup>8</sup> Jane Parkin, "Inner worlds, outer worlds", *New Zealand Books*, Spring 1993, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Michael King, "Fiction, flashy and otherwise", *Metro*, April 1989, p. 152.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Newton, *More*, March 1989, p. 146.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Ireland, "Icing on the cake", *Quote Unquote*, June 1996, p. 26.

Margaret to tell us her story in *Sing to Me, Dreamer*. Koea also employs circles of narrative with her use of the delayed revelation technique, the timing of which builds up our emotional response by the use of suspense as we gradually learn more about the situation in which the character is placed. Koea's direct address to the reader in *Sing to Me, Dreamer* indicates a writer who is very aware of her craft, and in this novel there is a particularly hypnotic rhythm as the story moves from past to present, spinning a web with its rich and poetic use of language. The confined world of Koea's fiction and its fairytale elements reinforce the traditional flavour of her storytelling. The lightness of the narrator's tone assures the reader of a just outcome, as does the humour which is central to the work and which tells us that this is the world of the story. The real world will be different from this when we emerge from the circus tent. Thus, the last chapter will investigate the contrivance which would appear to be a necessary part of such storytelling.

Koea's work, therefore, has numerous features which make it an interesting subject for study. Koea would appear, from Bilborough's and Wells' comments, to be out on a limb in comparison to other contemporary writers. There is a degree of daring in the risks she takes, which makes her readable for that alone, although in other terms she may be considered "light weight". In this regard, Kevin Ireland, reviewing *The Wedding at Bueno Vista*, made the following comment:

So far, Koea's books have not won our top prizes, though her previous novel *Sing to Me, Dreamer* was in every sense a work of absolute wonder. It seems to me that the problem may lie in the way we tend to rate writers in terms of "weight", rather like wrestlers and prize-fighters.

Such rankings speak of heavyweights, middleweights, lightweights, featherweights etc, and are often misleading, for they concede undue merit to the long-winded, lumbering, unfunny and downright turgid.

Ranked like wine or food - from (say) the delicious, piquant and satisfying to the unpleasant, sour and flat - a different set of literary values would be recognised. For me, Koea's work is superbly delectable, spicy and elegant. I'll drink to that.<sup>12</sup>

Koea's work may well be deliberately "light". It may not be trying to be anything else but an act, dazzling and spectacular, like a circus high-wire performance which holds its own truth to the confines of the circus tent. It may be admirable for its skill in language and particularly for its storytelling, but can it sustain the lack of serious characterisation and depth when it is undermined by a self-consciously melodramatic style? It is therefore questionable that Koea reaches the other side of the wire safely or, in other words, it is questionable how seriously the work may be taken in terms of its literary merit and in deciding whether or not it has lasting qualities.

That the work is self-consciously written may rescue Koea from going

<sup>12</sup> Kevin Ireland, "Icing on the cake", *Quote Unquote*, June 1996, p. 27.



the way of Princess Alice, the Incredible Lady Gymnast in Cilla McQueen's poem which is the epigraph to this introduction. In the title character we might identify Koea, and even her ladylike characters, and in the construction of the flying machine we might see the frippery and eclecticism of Koea's language. In the wind we might see her publisher, and in the "cloud of birds" and "parliament of trees" we might see other writers and the critics, or the literary canon for the final judgement. What is clear is that Koea has accepted the risk involved in "the desire for flight", and has told her stories her way, regardless of the consequences, and has been partly vindicated, at least in the short term, by significant sales of her work. She has read her audience well and, like the performer on the high-wire, knows how to please the crowd. How well her work stands up to closer scrutiny makes an interesting subject for the discussion to follow.

**Lawrence Ferlinghetti**

## CHAPTER I

### COMPARISONS WITH OTHER WRITERS

While comparisons can be made between Koea's work and that of a variety of other writers, it is the differences which are more revealing. Koea is not the first writer to use the woman-alone theme or to concentrate her settings on the domestic home and garden. The way in which she uses the theme and the settings, however, owes more to the stereotypical images of the romance genre and fashionable images of domesticity than to their development in serious fiction. The themes of the work, therefore, may be similar to those of others, but their treatment shows significant differences. Koea asserts that she has no training in writing (apart from journalism),<sup>1</sup> that she just writes her stories as it appears to her they should be told, preferring to entertain and charm rather than to convey any message.<sup>2</sup> In doing so she draws on traditions such as folk and fairy tales, the romance, the picaresque novel and the comic novel of manners. As we may recognise Margaret, in *Sing to Me, Dreamer*, by the quality of her jewels, Koea could be placing on the reader the responsibility for recognising quality as she picks and chooses the means of telling her story. The theme of marginalisation goes beyond the content of the work into the motivation of the writer behind it who, on leaving school, was told by her headmistress that she had no idea of her place in life and she should forget her ambitions and get work in a shop or a factory.<sup>3</sup> Koea defied the advice by embarking on a career in journalism, and continues to defy such arbitrary impositions of limits by daring to be different in her writing. Similarly, her characters defy the society which has misused them, retreating into isolation and solitude to gather the strength to assert their individuality. "I like to be left out, but I hate to be left out" Koea has said.<sup>4</sup> Her work bears testimony to this contradictory stance.

The differences in Koea's work have been indicated by reviewers since her work began to appear in print. The first collection of short stories drew comments such as: "There is something extraordinarily distinctive in her compressed style, and a touch of bravado in the use of metaphor...Hers is not subdued, fashionably flat prose - though she is capable of that...many New Zealand short story writers have done misery - and possibly done it better - while few have approached Koea's trenchant and idiosyncratic glee".<sup>5</sup> Of the second novel, *Staying Home and Being Rotten*, Graeme Lay

<sup>1</sup> Kevin Ireland, "Nightscapes", *Listener*, 8 Aug., 1992, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Leigh, "Personality Plus", *New Zealand Herald*, 12 Sept., 1992, 2:6.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Ireland, loc. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Wilson, "A Funny Correct Little Girl", *Quote Unquote*, July 1993, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Marion McLeod, "Armoury of bravado", *Listener*, 17 Oct. 1987, p. 70-74.

wrote: "It is worldly and cosmopolitan to an extent unusual in New Zealand fiction...".<sup>6</sup> Kevin Ireland, reviewing the third novel, *Sing to Me, Dreamer*, commented that "The epic, interior adventures of Koea's heroines...take place in what seems to be a world of miniature and make-believe, well outside the usual social presentations of ourselves".<sup>7</sup> In addition to these comments, reviewers (see Appendix One) identify a variety of distinguishing characteristics in Koea's work: its rich language - at times too rich for some tastes - and the employment of humour and satire, its recurrent themes, characters and settings.

The striking difference between Koea's style and that of other writers can be seen (in a compressed version) in a post-card story written by three writers as a demonstration for a competition run by National Radio. Listeners were invited to submit a story in the form of three postcards. Three New Zealand writers, Shonagh Koea, Maurice Gee and Marilyn Duckworth, contributed a story as an example, each writing one "postcard" (Appendix 2). Koea's gentle scene of ironic romantic melancholy is knocked off its high wire by Gee's bawdy realism and trampled underfoot by Duckworth's characteristic woman-in-a-mess pastiche (perhaps insanity could be the only possible explanation for such duality of character). These distinctions can be drawn between the styles of writing, perhaps more strongly because of the degree of self-parody in all three. In content, Koea's character definition is vague in contrast to the more boldly drawn characters of Gee and Duckworth.

Koea's use of the domestic settings of house and garden, which reflect significant aspects of the characters who inhabit them, is not unusual in women's writing, modern or otherwise. If we were to look for a local literary precedent, a writer who could be considered a forerunner of Koea in her choice of settings, and also in terms of the use of the marginalisation theme, is Helen Shaw (1913-1985) who was a friend and contemporary of Frank Sargeson. Her stories often centre on suburban villas and middle class characters.<sup>8</sup> The characters are often relegated to the margins of society by age, ill-health, past tragedies, and unrealised dreams and ambitions. Here too, the differences between Shaw and Koea reveal more about Koea's agenda. For example, while we are encouraged at times to feel sympathy for the marginalised characters, their causes are not championed as they are in Koea's work. There are few triumphant endings, although some are relieved by humour.

Shaw's houses and interiors also differ from Koea's in both outward appearance and in the values they represent. The villas in Shaw's stories are often falling into disrepair, are old and rambling structures with towers and attics, large primitive

---

<sup>6</sup> Graeme Lay, "Staying home and surviving", *North and South*, Sept. 1992, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Ireland, "Staying home and being normal", *Quote Unquote*, Nov. 1994, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Helen Shaw, *The Orange Tree and Other Stories*, Auckland: Pelorus Press, 1957.

kitchens and dark stuffy parlours full of velvet and lace drapery and intimidating furniture. These houses are often like a trap<sup>9</sup> from which the visitor escapes gratefully into the fresh air, leaving behind a sense of decay, both physical and mental. Only in *Sing to Me, Dreamer* does this kind of escape occur in Koea's work, when Margaret leaves her mother's house. Generally, in Koea's work the houses represent their owners' tastes and values, as in *Staying Home and Being Rotten* and in a number of the stories such as "Oh Bunny" from *The Woman Who Never Went Home* and "The Magic Way" and "A Different View" from *Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight*. The houses are also a stronghold against the attacks of the outside world, again as in "Oh Bunny", as well as in "Mrs Pratt Goes to China" (*WWNWH*), and in *The Grandiflora Tree*. Although Koea's houses are often stuffed full of old things, they are beautiful things: paintings, furniture, china, silver, and offer the promise of future wealth or insurance against misfortune, while in the meantime soothing the soul with their beauty. The escapes from the house on two occasions in *Sing to Me, Dreamer* have different origins. They occur because the house does not have the sense of being Margaret's own, although, on the second occasion, it legally belongs to her. It was her parents' house, and is haunted by mixed memories of the past. It does, however, like other Koea houses, yield unexpected treasures and a means of defence, both figuratively and literally.

Shelagh Duckham Cox, reviewing *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista*, notes Koea's linking of domestic interiors and the identity of the characters who inhabit them. She compares this with the writing of Jane Austen, commenting: "For both Jane Austen and Shonagh Koea the real world is to be found in domestic interiors filled with loved objects" and "Her [Elaine's] worn navy silk pyjamas, battered gold bracelet and old green silk suit are like Marianne's pianoforte and Elinor's drawings. They are what define her...".<sup>10</sup> The possessions which "define" Marianne and Elinor and other Austen heroines are sparse compared to those of Koea's heroines, and lead us to assume that Duckham Cox is referring to Jane Austen as represented in film, rather than the moral Jane Austen. Austen deals with the theme of exclusion and inclusion too, asserting the right of her heroines to cross class barriers in marriage and often also asserting their superiority of mind to those around them: a superiority which puts their worth above those of others with greater beauty or larger dowries. As for Koea's heroines, their domestic interiors reflect their tastes and their preoccupations, as if this is enough to assert their worth morally and mentally, as well as to make them worthy of our sympathetic consideration. Home is a place of security and quiet routines, but Koea's characters don't have to work so hard to assert their worthiness for inclusion. Koea puts no such emphasis on the minds of her heroines nor does she as successfully assert their moral superiority. They are passive, and the narrative posits that it will take a discerning eye (largely in assessing the value of their possessions), rather than action of their own, for there to be recognition of their worth, and this is deemed to be sufficient.

The domestic settings of Koea's work give us fashionable images of gardens with

<sup>9</sup> The trap which the domestic world of Koea's fiction represents is of a different kind. See Conclusion, pp. 89-90.

<sup>10</sup> Shelagh Duckham Cox, *Landfall*, Spring 1996, p. 323.

fashionable plants, particularly in cottage garden style: salvias, daisies, roses, and magnolias and camellias. The interiors are furnished with valuable antiques, china and paintings - perhaps aged and battered, like the silver teapot and the foxed watercolours in *Staying Home*, but valuable to those who have a discerning eye, the narrative is quick to point out, so that many items escape the notice of the burglars in *The Wedding at Buenavista*. The narrator informs the reader of their worth, and the suggestion is made that the owner of these items is also of worth because she has the taste to select them in the first place and because she cherishes them for their emotional worth first, although they may prove useful in a more pecuniary sense in times of need. The interiors come to speak for the heroines, therefore, as if there is no other means of measuring the worth of a character than by their material possessions. Koea has said that "Antiques invite ...'my orphan complex'. If they are broken and need some care, so much the better"<sup>11</sup> and this could apply to her heroines as well, they are "poor things" who do not need to justify themselves. The characters who have the "discerning eye" are by that very attribute sympathetic characters. Less worthy characters, like the Goldblatts in *Sing to Me, Dreamer*, possess "splintery reproduction furniture" (167). This simplistic judging of character by their taste in furniture is a recurring feature in Koea's work.

In Helen Shaw's stories, as in Koea's, there is a strong sense of fear of the future; a fear of losing old values and old ways of living. However, Koea is more likely to attribute blame than to show the adaptable responses to these fears evident in Shaw. Rosalind's reconstruction of her self-esteem (*SHBR*) depends upon making people pay "for the dissembling of grace" (151). Shaw's Mrs Brockieburn, seen through the eyes of her young grandson in "Singeing the Cockerel", demonstrates her adaptability when she transforms herself from working housewife in sacking apron to social hostess in black sequins and lorgnette for the visit of Mrs Pringle. To her grandson the transformation is startling: from common-sense competence to sophisticated simpering, which is reversed when Mrs Pringle departs. The social visit of Mrs Pringle in Shaw's story resembles the discomforting social calls which occur, merely for the sake of form, to offer condolences to the widow or to offer unsolicited advice, in Koea's *The Grandiflora Tree*. However, Koea's heroine, remains, on the whole, locked in passivity, enduring the visit until it is over, just maintaining a veneer of politeness, but unable to make the most of the visit as does Shaw's Mrs Brockieburn.

Shaw's story "Praise the Lord, Wilson" in which old Miss Barclay's neighbour proceeds to chop down trees despite Miss Barclay's admonitions and brandishing of a shotgun, is echoed in *Sing to Me, Dreamer*, in which Margaret's neighbour claims some of her land as his own and advances upon its old camellias with a chainsaw. Margaret is more successful than Miss Barclay in chasing him off, using her late uncle's naval sword (antique, of course, nineteenth century), but only after she has found the inner resources to achieve this feat, which she finishes off by sending the offending chainsaw through her neighbour's picture window. Helen Shaw's character has the disadvantage of age added to that of gender to exclude her from the notice of her

<sup>11</sup> Tim Wilson, "A Funny Correct Little Girl", *Quote Unquote*, July 1993, p. 19.

neighbour. The shotgun, symbol of male power, becomes useless in her hands. She has sold her land, so has no legal right to insist that the trees remain. While her identification with the land remains, her feelings are now of no account. Koea's character is younger but excluded from the assistance of the police, the town council and her own lawyer by her perceived difference or eccentricity. She maintains ownership of the land, but must assert her right to it, which is clearly related to her right of inclusion. It is Koea's intention to enable the inclusion of her excluded characters, to re-write a perceived pessimistic reality. That the naval sword becomes a real threat in her heroine's hands is symbolic of this.

Since Koea requires an optimistic re-writing of reality, more suitable prototypes of Koea's heroines can be found in revised traditional folk and fairy tales, in which we recognise the heroine by her beauty and inherent goodness. While original fairy tales apparently had heroines who had to work hard to prove their worth and had adventures of their own, this was supplanted later by the Victorian and, more recently, the Disney passive heroine awaiting rescue.<sup>12</sup> All of Koea's novels use fairy tale images, often of enclosure, such as the tower, the walled garden and the gilded cage. To some extent these images are used to show the heroines' self-deception, but they are used sympathetically. This is in contrast to the work of other contemporary writers such as Margaret Atwood, for example, in whose work the women so described must take responsibility for themselves, as in her short stories in the collection entitled *Bluebeard's Egg* (1987). For Atwood, there is no question of rescue from the tower; all actions have much harsher consequences than for Koea, so that in Atwood's novel *Bodily Harm* (1982) the main character's tolerance of her partner's domination-and-submission sexual practices is reflected in her imprisonment in a corrupt and dangerous totalitarian country: victimhood is no excuse. In contrast, Rosalind's encounter with armed soldiers on her trip to South Africa (*Staying Home and Being Rotten*) is simply a reminder that the world is a dangerous place. She is never held to account for her relationship with the violent James. She is a victim in a way which Atwood does not allow.

Thus Koea's heroines are transparent, fashionable constructions based on images of popular culture, inhabiting fashionably pretty interiors and gardens, rather like Queen Marie Antoinette playing at being a shepherdess. Shelagh Duckham Cox, disappointed by the outcome of the main character in *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista*, comments that "The novel's central character fails to equal in moral strength her own powers of taste and of expression".<sup>13</sup> Nicola Chapman, reviewing the same book, notes "She [Elaine] does not learn that Prince Charming is the flipside of Bluebeard...It would have been more exciting still if Cinderella had truly started to grow up".<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> While this notion may be attributed to feminist revisionism, it has led to some collections such as Alison Lurie's *Clever Gretchen and other forgotten folktales*, the cover of which claims the book features "heroines with energy, oomph and character".

<sup>13</sup> Shelagh Duckham Cox, *Landfall*, Spring 1996, p. 325.

<sup>14</sup> Nicola Chapman, "Mythic anguish", *Listener*, July 6, 1996, p. 43.

Koea's frequent choice of the theme of "woman alone" is not unusual in modern women's writing, nor is it a totally alien concept in New Zealand literature where "man alone" has been a major theme. In Koea's writing, as in that of other women writers, it is woman alone, generally in an urban setting, distrusting men and developing a means of survival, compared with the man alone in a rural setting, battling isolation and the harsh environment, distrusting women. Koea, however, renders a passive, romantic, stereotyped heroine despite her efforts to balance the diverse elements of seriousness and humour, realism and fantasy. The romantic treatment of the woman-alone character often verges on the burlesque. Ultimately, Koea's heroine may satisfy in terms of wish fulfilment, but not beyond that point.

Koea's combination of the serious and the humorous makes it clear that her heroine is not allowed complete *carte blanche*, but sympathy clearly lies with her. For example, the heroine's self-deception is indulged. Bernadette in *The Grandiflora Tree* has imagined her life and her marriage to be something it apparently is not. Rosalind in *Staying Home* has imagined that the young man leaning nonchalantly in at her french windows saying "They told me...that a lady lived here all by herself" (47) could provide her with the *tendresse* she craves. Margaret in *Sing to Me, Dreamer* is a dreamer (Rosalind is also so-described), whose naivety blinds her to the dangers around her. Elaine, in *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista* hopes that her stage-managed imaginary wedding will protect her from the unwelcome attentions of suitors and burglars alike. The short stories on the same theme outline various aspects of betrayal by friends and husbands, and tell either how the protagonist learns to survive (which occurs in the majority of the stories) or how she fails to cope with her altered circumstances, at least at the point at which the story finishes, as in "Death and Transfiguration" (*FRBC*) and in "A Rustle in the Undergrowth" (*WWNWH*). The indulgence of a heroine who maintains her self-deception, or who may recognise it but still long for her rose-tinted view of the world, belongs to the romance genre.

The degree to which such passivity and wish fulfilment can be tolerated is indicated by two critical comments. Ronda Cooper, reviewing *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista*, commented: "Koea's wimp-heroines can be very tedious - their chronic passivity, their self-effacement and politeness, their possum-in-the-headlights response to life's difficulties",<sup>15</sup> while Shelagh Duckham Cox tried to explain Koea's appeal, relating it to the current interest in Jane Austen:

Perhaps it's because there's so much disillusionment in the air that Jane Austen appeals to Shonagh Koea's nineties. Feminism hasn't fulfilled its seventies promise, so - as women - let's try to refashion a society that gives us time to ourselves, quietness, nice houses and possessions, a proper appreciation of beauty, love triumphant and no more need to do absolutely everything for

---

<sup>15</sup> Ronda Cooper, "History repeats", *Metro*, August 1996, p. 110.



ourselves...<sup>16</sup>

Thus, Koea has catered to fashionable tastes in the manner of a storyteller who has read her audience well. There is also a sense that Koea has anticipated unfavourable criticism for, in a letter Rosalind writes to an editor who has requested one of her poems for inclusion in a collection to be called *Glowing Lights Amongst the Stars*, Koea might be making a comment about her own work:

*I must confess to you that my publisher found the work  
a dated one, and indeed this could be so, but I think myself  
that, say, stanzas 46-92 have their own brand of charm  
that is not without merit when viewed in the light of  
historical literary contexts. (SHBR, 177)*

Koea may be claiming historical literary contexts are of some significance in her work, although she cites her enjoyment of only one such context: that of a group of writers (Anthony Powell,<sup>17</sup> Joyce Cary, Evelyn Waugh and Aldous Huxley) whose variously comic and satiric novels date from the 1920s. She admired Cary's characterisation of the opportunistic Gulley Jimson, and this element of the picaresque appears in her characterisation of Rosalind.<sup>18</sup> Graham Lay compared Koea's "acridity" with that of Evelyn Waugh, the English novelist and satirist who wrote bitter satire and black comedy, particularly of the years between the two world wars.<sup>19</sup> Yet the connections are tenuous, despite what Jane Parkin calls "a subversive mix"<sup>20</sup> in Koea's work, since any edge it is given by a combination of satire and humour is diminished by the pathos of its heroines and decorative settings.

Moving into the more contemporary sphere, Graeme Lay also sees in Koea's writing "the cutting edge of a Fay Weldon".<sup>21</sup> Fay Weldon has been described as a satirising moralist, as has Koea,<sup>22</sup> and her work has been remarked upon for its wit. "Delightfully witty and wicked" says an excerpt from the *New York Times* review on the dust jacket of *The Fat Woman's Joke* (1967). Weldon's humour is more black than Koea's, however, just as Koea's work does not have Weldon's intellectual and political depth. Weldon's satire is directed at more serious social, and human failings and reveals the points of view of a variety of characters, as opposed to Koea's more simplistically

---

<sup>16</sup> Shelagh Duckham Cox, op. cit., p. 324.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Morrissey, "Most wonderful", *Listener*, 6 July, 1996, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Farmer, *Broadsheet*, Autumn 1993, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Graham Lay, "Precious gems", *North and South*, October 1993, p.130.

<sup>20</sup> Jane Parkin, reviewing *Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight*, *New Zealand Books*, Spring 1993, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Graham Lay, "Staying Home and Surviving", *North and South*, September 1992, p.126.

<sup>22</sup> Anne French, "Tenpins flying", *Listener*, Sept. 17, 1994, p. 46.

focused acid defence of her wronged heroine. Furthermore, the possessions of Weldon's characters reflect their social status rather than their moral worth. Her beleaguered characters are more likely to reside in a damp and dingy basement flat (*The Fat Woman's Joke*) or in a dilapidated caravan on waste ground (*The Heart of the Country*), than in a charming cottage filled with minor, but precious, antiques (*Staying Home and Being Rotten*) or in a circus caravan painted dark blue with a powder blue pennant flying triumphantly from its television aerial (*Sing to Me, Dreamer*). In contrast to Weldon, Koea, once again, puts more emphasis on entertainment than on the message.

A *Landfall* review by Anna Neill of *The Grandiflora Tree* also included a review of Duckworth's *Explosions on the Sun* (1989), a collection of short stories. Neill claimed that the books revealed "an uncanny connection". Both included themes of bereavement, a sense of loss, death or departure which "infect the prose with a melancholy of its own. Memories of loved ones become voices from the past which return to disturb the order of the present". For Neill, the progress of both Duckworth and Koea's narratives is weighted down by being "haunted by a kind of 'after-life'".<sup>23</sup> Other comparisons are not obvious. *Explosions on the Sun* contains a range of themes, and features an almost surreal stream-of-consciousness narrative in its title story (1987), and unsoftened, harsh, earthy realism in "Sharing" (1987), neither of which occurs, so far, in Koea's work. The one story in the collection which is reminiscent of Koea's work is "Honeymoon" (1988) in which a man deprives his new wife of food. The enticing descriptions of food and the agonies of the wife are reminiscent of Koea's stories about men who attempt to make the lives of women a misery, such as James in *Staying Home and Being Rotten*, Manfred in "The Tea Party" and Bunty in "The Widow" (*FRBC*). Yet, as Jane Parkin observes in her reviews of *Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight* and Duckworth's *Seeing Red*, Koea's world is "cloistered" compared with Duckworth's "messy, recognisably 'nineties' concerns",<sup>24</sup> an observation which could in fact be made from the titles alone. Duckworth's characters Francie and Sidney in *Married Alive* (1985) have faint echoes of Rosalind and James in *Staying Home and Being Rotten*, perhaps simply because the situation is common enough: that of a woman struggling to find the inner strength to free herself from a possessive, abusive man. Furthermore, Koea's endings are likely to be more optimistic than those of Marilyn Duckworth who, according to Heather Roberts, "can see absolutely no way out for her women characters".<sup>25</sup>

Ronda Cooper reviewed Koea's *Fifteen Rubies By Candlelight* and Fiona Kidman's short story collection *The Foreign Woman* (1993),<sup>26</sup> and although Cooper makes no comparisons between the writers, it is clear from her comments about Kidman

<sup>23</sup> Anna Neill, *Landfall*, March 1990, pp.118-120.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Parkin, "Inner worlds, outer worlds", *NZ Books*, Spring 1993, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Heather Roberts, *Where Did She Come From? NZ Woman Novelists 1862-1987*, Wellington, Allen & Unwin, 1989.

<sup>26</sup> Ronda Cooper, "Significant Subtleties", *Metro*, October 1993, pp.154-155.

that comparisons can be made: "...the collection is mostly concerned with foreignness at home - the people who don't quite fit in, people on the margins, separate, left-out, alien." Like much of Koea's work, "Several stories feature women who don't conform to the expected respectabilities...". Koea tends to show that her protagonists are "right", and everyone else is "wrong", to put it simply (this is particularly true of *Sing to Me, Dreamer*). Kidman, on the other hand, according to Cooper, "has compassion for the seemingly inevitable compromises imposed on such lives. The price may be sudden desertion and divorce, tragic violence, or a merely slow acquiescence: the process of adjustment and accommodation to children and domestic routines." Koea's outcomes, by contrast, continue to assert the right of her heroines to a happy ending. Thus, in *Sing to Me, Dreamer* Margaret runs off to join a circus. There is no compromise, although in *Staying Home and Being Rotten*, Rosalind's resorting to high-class prostitution and fraudulent art dealing could be considered a compromise of character. Instead, all await rescue.

The work of both Duckworth and Kidman contains those "messy, recognisably 'nineties' concerns" and Kidman's stories, notably "Furs" and "Damn Wordsworth", have large, complicated casts of characters. It is the "messiness" which makes the most obvious contrast with Koea's work. Koea has equally recognisable contemporary concerns: domestic violence, loss of self-esteem, self-deception, loss of wealth through burglary and share-market misfortune, death and heart-break all occur in Koea's work too, but, in contrast, they are superficially "tidied up" by a calculated layer of decorum; a politeness of manner and habit which is exercised by the protagonist because it is one of the few things of value which she can sustain in her life in order to maintain what dignity she has left. She doesn't fall apart and become fat and slovenly. She keeps up appearances as a defence. In many ways, she has more resources at her disposal than the equivalent character in the novels of other writers. For example, Kidman's historical novel *The Book of Secrets* (1987) has some parallels with Koea's themes, and is about a woman who becomes a "pariah", sentenced to house arrest for life by the strict religious sect whose rules she has disobeyed. Her experiences reveal the harshness of those who have judged against her, and the only release she has from her situation is within her own mind. Unlike Koea's protagonists, she cannot thumb her nose at those who have oppressed her, or escape by the judicious and discreet use of a millionaire, or be rescued by a circus elephant. She can take quiet pleasure in the daily routines of her house and garden, but the setting is not relieved by drifts of daisies and blue salvia edging the lawn or by foxed watercolours in the living room which can be exchanged for cash in times of need.

Two contemporary New Zealand writers whose work does seem closer than all of these writers to that of Koea are Sheridan Keith and Judith White. Thematically, their work coincides with Koea's, often involving solitary ruminations on the nature of death, solitude and relationships with others which can reveal self-deception or celebrate self-discovery. The title story of Judith White's *Visiting Ghosts* (1991) concerns itself with the two themes of self-deception and death, as the first-person

narrator relates an incident which triggers memories of her dead father and of the unresolved relationship between them, like Margaret's unresolved relationship with her mother in *Sing to Me, Dreamer*. White's "Soul Survivor" is also about a child coming to terms with the loss of his father, and of the passing of childhood. In "Unpredictably Out of Hand" Arthur finds a hand on the beach and contemplates his own loneliness, the precarious nature of life and his lack of meaningful contact with others. Similar concerns occur in Koea's stories about men on their own. In "Edmund and the Tempest" (WNNWH), Edmund faces the failures of his life when he compares himself with a successful and famous contemporary. The storm which batters his house during his self-confrontation mirrors his inner turmoil and despair. In "A Different View" (FRBC), Peter reconstructs himself and his life after the death of his wife. In "Good News" (FRBC), an elderly man (never named) contemplates the depths of his lonely and unloved state.

White's humour is also reminiscent of Koea's, as in "Rainy Day Purples" in which Bee, Vera and Alice visit Monica to inspect her new house. Bee, appropriately dressed in orange and black, in contrast to the other women's shades of lilac, cuts through the pretentiousness of the occasion, with its little savouries and cakes wheeled in on a tea trolley by laughing raucously and speaking plainly.

'Monica, these little prune and bacon strips are so tasty.'  
'Thank you, Vera. They're very easy.'  
'They'll keep us on the trot,' chortled Bee.<sup>27</sup>

A similar "sending-up" of social conventions or behaviour is central in Koea's *The Grandiflora Tree*. The implicit criticism of uniformity, of homogeneous blandness, in the (in this case) pink decor with which the women, in various shades of purple, blend, and with which Bee, significantly, clashes, is also of a kind which occurs in Margaret's visit to the Goldblatt's house in *Sing to Me, Dreamer*. Both White and Koea use this method to further the cause of the one who doesn't quite fit in. The marginalisation theme is used to champion individuality over narrow, restrictive, unimaginative conformity.

Another story in White's *Visiting Ghosts* collection, entitled "All Alone", begins: "As Roland picked at his navel with a toothpick he thought about his mother".<sup>28</sup> This prepares the reader for the unfolding of a humorous tale but, like Koea, White manages a tidy integration of the humorous and the poignant. The themes of death, solitude, self-discovery and relationships with others all occur in this story. Roland, whose mother has just died, is interrupted in his solitary activity by Norma, a neighbour, bringing date scones. They discover love in unusual circumstances when they are locked in a cupboard by a burglar, and:

It was the minister, wondering why Roland hadn't attended

---

<sup>27</sup> Judith White, *Visiting Ghosts*, Auckland, Sceptre, 1991, p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> Judith White, op. cit., p. 17.

the funeral, who eventually found them. They sat like two guilty children, blinking and groaning their relief at being found and embarrassedly trying to shield their happiness.<sup>29</sup>

However, humour and optimism are more blatant in Koea's short stories and novels. "The Really Good Stuff" and "The Dancing Master" (*WWNWH*) also send up social behaviour. In "The Dancing Master", office politics are exposed at a staff social, and in "The Really Good Stuff" the "politics" of marriage and upward mobility are the target of Koea's wit to the point of burlesque, so that the issues are never seriously addressed.

The place of Koea's work in the wider context of serious women's writing seems to devolve on her ultimate lack of resolution of the serious issues she addresses, even more than on her failure to seriously represent a progression towards a resolution. Yet, her particular concern with the position of the widow or woman who, without the "protection" of a husband, becomes both inconvenient and easy prey, might appear to fit Koea's work into the definition of feminist writing given by Rita Felski in her book *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989), which is chosen because her definition of what constitutes feminist writing is broadly inclusive. After all, Koea does engage in some serious discussion, as Anna Coffey, reviewing *Staying Home and Being Rotten* comments:

On the serious side Koea asks: can women of a certain age, programmed for derivative destiny, achieve dignity in the absence of economic independence? ("Women can do anything now," a psychiatrist friend tells Rosalind, "you could be a stevedore.")

Koea's answer is no; the social and economic structure is heavily loaded against them in an ageist sexist society.<sup>30</sup>

This would appear to fit Koea's work inside the wide boundary around feminist writing which Felski sees as embracing "the diversity of contemporary literary texts which engage sympathetically with feminist ideas, whatever their particular form".<sup>31</sup> She traces its origins to the eighteenth and nineteenth century struggles for equal civil and political rights for women, and sees this continuing today with attempts to improve the social status of women. In explaining her wide definition she writes:

Feminism can in fact be understood as an example of a 'postmodern' world view which is fundamentally pluralistic rather than holistic and self-contained, embracing differing and often conflicting positions.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Judith White, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>30</sup> Anna Coffey, "Humour from ageist frame", *New Zealand Herald*, 12 Sept. 1992, 2:6.

<sup>31</sup> Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Rita Felski, op. cit., p.13.

She argues against the exclusion of writing as "insufficiently feminist" since one of the major concerns of feminism has been "the intimate elements of personal experience" (14).

Although critical comment, thus far, has not described Koea's work as "insufficiently feminist" (although something similar may be implied by the disappointment with the ending of the fourth novel) it does seem too decorous for its time, on the one hand, and on the other offensive in some respects to feminist thought. Rosalind's liaison with Benjamin, for example, in *Staying Home and Being Rotten*, seems rather doubtful as an act of empowerment. Angela Carter, however, commented that:

...in a world organised by contractual obligations, the whore represents the only possible type of honest woman... At least the girl who sells herself with her eyes open is not a hypocrite and, in a world with a cash-sale ideology, that is a positive, even a heroic virtue.<sup>33</sup>

Rosalind recognises this world of "contractual obligations" and "cash-sale ideology" and responds accordingly. She "now knows that she is just as bad as everyone else, and has become a member of the world" (177). There may also be doubt about Rosalind's seeming lack of a sense of female solidarity with her friend Dinah. Although she values her friendship greatly she does not reveal what she knows, although the difficulties of doing so are obvious. There may be severe doubts about Margaret's idyllic twenty years as concubine to a maharajah in *Sing to Me, Dreamer*. Despite the apparently flawed politics, the work, thus far, fits into Felski's broad definition of feminist literature as "all those texts that reveal a critical awareness of women's subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category, however this is expressed" (14). Koea widow or woman-alone protagonist is evidence of Koea's awareness of this character and her position as problematic.

All of Koea's novels fit to some extent into the category of writing which Felski labels "the novel of self-discovery" and which she claims is the type of book "most clearly identified with contemporary feminist writing",<sup>34</sup> yet they fail to fit in one crucial respect. Felski sees this type of book as a reworking of the *bildungsroman* which, traditionally, followed the aspirations of men in the context of a wide range of social options not available to women. The feminist *bildungsroman* parodies the male version, which traces the rejection of the world in favour of an inner consciousness. The women's stories move in the opposite direction, rejecting social order rather than growing towards a gradual acceptance of it. The male *bildungsroman* is often like an apprenticeship story, in which the hero is young and learns about life. The women's stories cover a wider range of age. The heroine often begins her journey after the

<sup>33</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Women and the Ideology of Pornography*, New York, Pantheon, 1978, pp.57-58.

<sup>34</sup> Rita Felski, op. cit., p.122.

experience of marriage. The contemporary feminist *bildungsroman*, however, is characterised by a quest for self-discovery "in which access to selfknowledge is seen to require an explicit refusal of the heterosexual romance plot, the framework which has traditionally defined the meaning and direction of women's lives".<sup>35</sup> It is the explicit *espousal* of the heterosexual romance plot which excludes Koea, in the end, from Felski's pattern.

Koea seems to set up "explicit refusal", particularly in *Staying Home and Being Rotten* in which Rosalind's search for "a little *tendresse*" following her widowhood has landed her in a violent relationship. The book begins some two years after this event and chronicles Rosalind's recovery of self-esteem, her complete reassessment of the world in which she lives and her formulation of a means of survival. Indeed, in all of Koea's novels the protagonists suddenly find themselves transported outside the sheltered environment of marriage (or concubinage in the case of Margaret) into a new world in which the rules have changed seemingly overnight. They all seem to have to justify their existence, and come up against the brick wall of social convention or obstacles which work against them. The solution for all of them depends upon their defiance of convention in one form or another, and a discovery of an individual path which they can travel with dignity and integrity intact. Yet they all (Bernadette to a lesser extent) look back to their secure married lives with nostalgia, awaiting rescue. Indeed, in *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista* Koea returns to the archetypal romance ending.

Arguably, the turn around from an apparent refusal of the romantic plot to an espousal of it constitutes a refusal to slip into a predictable, politically correct conclusion. Certainly, the reader has cause to think about what is expected from a contemporary female writer. Defiance of social convention is what Felski calls "the process of *separation*" which in literature of the last twenty years, she claims, is "the essential precondition for any path to self-knowledge". She writes further that "the novel of self-discovery proceeds from the recognition of women's estrangement within a male-defined environment but also articulates the possibility of at least a partial individual liberation from existing ideological and social constraints toward a degree of self-determination".<sup>36</sup> This is in contrast to eighteenth century texts, where the solution for the heroine was euphoric (marriage) or dysphoric (death), and nineteenth century texts, in which the choices were often negative ones such as a repressive marriage or withdrawal and self-destruction, and in which there was also the emergence of the "problematic heroine" whose choices brought her into conflict with bourgeois ideology, as in the adultery of Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina. In *Jane Eyre*, the development of the female identity is "ultimately subordinated to the demands of the marriage plot" which creates an "ironic tension between the heroine's acquisition of independence and self-knowledge, and the at times obviously formulaic closure demanded by the social narrative". Felski writes that in these works often "the heroine's struggle against existing

---

<sup>35</sup> Rita Felski, loc. cit.

<sup>36</sup> Rita Felski, op. cit., p.124.

constraints necessitates her symbolic or literal destruction as the price to be paid for the attempted transgression of social and sexual mores" whereas, now, "this kind of dichotomy, of either marriage or death, is transcended in the contemporary self-discovery narrative: it is an essentially *optimistic* genre, bearing witness to women's self-identification as an oppressed group, and hence as a potential challenge to existing social values".<sup>37</sup>

The conclusion of Koea's novels is certainly optimistic, in a way which is in contrast to the writing of overtly feminist writers such as Margaret Atwood, whose work is often deliberately pessimistic so that the reader cannot finish the novel or short story feeling that justice will ever be done without some kind of personal action or responsibility being taken. Koea's optimism is in her happy endings, but there is no great sense of "liberation from existing ideological and social constraints" and certainly neither symbolic nor literal destruction. Mostly the characters try to find acceptance within society, to overcome estrangement and, while Margaret (*SMD*) chooses a culture outside the mainstream, in the circus, this gives her acceptance of sorts in terms of fame. Koea's work is more like a rather thin plea for tolerance of her widow figure and a condemnation of the insensitive people who prey upon her - a complaint about social behaviour rather than a revolutionary gesture.

Therefore, the degree to which Koea's work fits the pattern of the novel of self-discovery outlined by Felski is limited. The pattern seems to fit the beginning of Koea's novels in terms of the use of a negative female image: passive, alienated, restricted and with an asymmetry of male-female power, the woman being confined to the private sphere, denied public activity and independent self-fulfilment. The male, like James in *Staying Home*, Charlie in *The Grandiflora Tree*, Goldblatt in *Sing to Me*, and Adrian in *The Wedding*, is unable to see women "other than in relation to his own emotional and sexual interests".<sup>38</sup> In the case of Goldblatt, and the burglars in *The Wedding*, we could add to this pecuniary interests. However, Koea's work fails to fit the second part of Felski's pattern, for here the self discovery involves opposition and resistance on the part of the heroine, who questions the position she is in, and undergoes a psychological transformation or a "shift in perspective". The focus is on this transformation rather than on "a detailed exploration of its social implications". The heroine moves "outward from the oppressive environment, such as from the city to the wilderness, or inward to a secluded and sheltered room". In Koea, one is not convinced that the self-discovery is a beginning, "a basis for future negotiations between the subject and society, the outcome of which is projected beyond the bounds of the text".<sup>39</sup> Even Rosalind, the only one of the heroines to seek paid employment, looks for rescue and a romantic ending. She realises the "someone else" is herself in this extract from a conversation with Dinah about Ben:

---

<sup>37</sup> Rita Felski, op. cit., p.125.

<sup>38</sup> Rita Felski, op. cit., p.133.

<sup>39</sup> Rita Felski, op. cit, pp.131-133.



'He says he's fallen in love with someone else -'  
'Oh, has he?' Rosalind brightens. (183)

Felski's pattern of self-discovery ends with the character moving out into the world through the "mediating structure of the female community". Koea's protagonists are as likely to find kindness and assistance from male characters as they are from female, but it is always a male character who has more power (or money) to give the most effective support. Bernadette finds comfort in her telephone conversations with her son, and feels a comradeship with the old man at the beach (75) and the attendant at the museum (79). Her attempts to join a group of widows is disastrous, and she flees from their bickering. Rosalind values her long-standing friendship with Dinah, yet they do not understand each other very well. It is Benjamin who tolerates her eccentricities and provides the means to rescue her from penury. Margaret is greatly assisted by Ranji, the holy man from Agra, and Captain Kothari, on whom she pins some hope for the future. Elaine is rescued from her tower by a man who tells her:

'If you need a hat I've got a nice hat in the car you can have.  
I thought I'd take you over the bridge to a wonderful forest by the sea. There are peacocks there - white peacocks - and you can see them strolling under the trees. I'll give you champagne,' he said, 'and strawberries, and if there are prickles I'll carry you along the path, so don't worry.' (195)

The other female characters, however, are as likely to be placed in opposition to the protagonist as the predatory males. Charlie's mistress, Doreen, and the post-funeral callers in *The Grandiflora Tree* are examples, as are Margaret's mother (at first) and Goldblatt's wife in *Sing to Me*. There is also modelling of self-destructive or self-limiting behaviour in the secondary characters Phyllis, Priscilla, Roberta and Dinah in *Staying Home*.

Koea's use of fantasy may be another point of departure from what Felski sees as the all-embracing feminist text. Although Flora Alexander notes that writing which moves beyond realism allows "a mode in which dreams, or metaphors, are employed to say something about social and historical or psychological realities",<sup>40</sup> in Koea's work fantasy serves little more purpose than that of wish fulfilment and mirroring the heroine's self-deception, which is thereby endorsed rather than exposed. In the first two novels the fantasy is in the minds of the protagonists, expressing the manner in which they see themselves, and their naive expectations of what the world holds for them. This is reflected in the imagery in the books: images of the princess in the tower, and so on. In the third novel, the fantasy becomes "real" in that the protagonist *has* lived in her pink palace with an adoring Maharaja, *is* discovering buckets filled with jewels in her mother's house, *has* been befriended by an elephant who lives in her garden, and *does* run off to join a circus. This amounts to a degree of magic realism which is

---

\*Flora Alexander *Contemporary Women Novelists* London, Edward Arnold, 1989, p. 61.

described as being recognisable when the "strange" events are written as being "objectively real".<sup>41</sup> According to Chanady, the "presence of a realistic framework...constitutes the primary difference between magical realism and pure fantasy, such as that found in fairy tales. Not only is the story set in a normal, contemporary world, but it also contains many realistic descriptions of man and society".<sup>42</sup> With this use of magic realism, albeit in a limited sense, the theme of self-deception and awakening from a dream-like state of the first two novels is taken further in the third with a kind of justification for the self-deception, as if to insist "Why not? Why can't dreams come true and faith be justified?" Yet self deception and dreams do not amount to a "realistic description of man and society". Anthea Zeman in *Presumptuous Girls: Women and their world in the serious woman's novel* is interested in women novelists who "do not want a sheikh or a tiger-skin or a ministering angel's lamp in their books, and they spend only brief holidays on the wilder shores of love",<sup>43</sup> and one wonders what she would think of Margaret's maharaja (*SMD*) and Benjamin's Moroccan rug with the magical runes (*SHBR*).

The links Koea's writing has with romance fiction are evident in the following outline of its typical plot structure:

Heroines commonly are orphaned, come into a small inheritance, travel to foreign parts, and are employed - sometimes even kidnapped - by the dark, ruthless owners of large, isolated mansions. They often spend a chapter or two 'finding themselves' or establishing their sense of identity, frequently assert their independence in the face of masculine assumptions of authority, and nearly always feel under threat emotionally if not physically from the dominant male in the story. But in one way or another, the heroine emerges victorious, enriched and with enhanced social status.<sup>44</sup>

This has echoes of the plot of *Staying Home and Being Rotten*, in which Rosalind, not orphaned but widowed and in possession of a degree of wealth, is lured to South Africa and England by James who keeps her in his London flat by withholding her passport and air tickets. Most of the novel is about her assertion of her independence from James and others like him. The kinds of events Daphne Claire describes occur in various other Koea stories and novels, and although the heroines are not young girls, they have a kind of innocence due to their hitherto sheltered lives. The romantic hero is a shadowy figure in Koea's work, however, not "the most crucial character ...the linchpin who holds the

<sup>41</sup>Amaryll Beatrice Chanady *Magical Realism and the Fantastic* New York, Garland Publishing Inc. 1985, p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Chanady, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>43</sup> Anthea Zeman, *Presumptuous Girls*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977, p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> Daphne Claire, "Sweet Subversions", in Krentz, Jayne Ann (ed.) *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992, p. 64. Daphne Claire, a New Zealand writer, also publishes "serious" fiction under the name Daphne Claire de Jong.

story together" which, for Mary Jo Putney is "a key difference between romance and what is usually defined as women's fiction, where the heroine and her progress through life are the focus of the story".<sup>45</sup> Yet he is nostalgically recalled in the figure of the dead husband and the heroine looks forward to a similar happy ending once more. In the meantime, her world seems to be inhabited mainly by villains. Rosalind never teaches James the error of his ways, and does not turn him from villain to hero as is the usual pattern in romance fiction. The focus appears to be on making changes within herself, yet this is never fully realised. Instead she seeks a happy ending with Ben who has come to her rescue, just as Margaret waits for Captain Kothari to rescue her, and just as Elaine is rescued by Richard when she had given up all hope.

Janice Radway in her research into romance fiction found that it represented for its readers an achievement of autonomy within a situation of female subjectivity; an ironic, paradoxical achievement, yet one for which its readers longed.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps, as Shelagh Duckham Cox has commented (see pages 17-18), for Koea's readers too there is no possibility of acceptance in society for the widow heroine, and so the revenge against those who would prevent such acceptance, by means of the fantasy of the stories, satisfies a longing for justice for this marginalised heroine. If we are to sympathise with such a passive figure as Koea's widow character, she must be presented in terms which will enable this, and so we have the decorous, polite tone of an earlier age when women so-described were "birds in gilded cages". To this is added elements of the romance genre and fairy tales, and elements of Jane Austen (as they are presented in the popular media of film and television with the beautiful gardens and interiors of the privileged). Humour and satire are added, perhaps to sop up some of the sentimentality, yet, ultimately, failing to create a character who is any more than two-dimensional. We are to take her seriously and yet, simultaneously, we are prevented from doing so.

Thus, while Koea's work can be compared with that of others and parallels discovered, it is the differences, the points at which she differs from other writers, which are the most revealing. Consistently, it is the contradiction between her insistence that we take her heroine seriously and her failure to "flesh her out" and satisfactorily resolve her situation, which marks the departure from reality and undermines her work. As such, it will always be excluded from the canon, enjoyable as it may be in, and despite of, its own limited frame of reference. In content we have rather delicate heroines, simplistic character delineations, a confined, middle class, domestic world, aspects of the romance plot, and themes of alienation and isolation. Instead of any "backbone" of action, there is a rather feeble plea for acceptance, for the right of the excluded characters to participate in society without prejudicial or patronising judgements about them. The consequence is work in which the style triumphs over substance, for its language is engaging and sensuous, its twists and turns of plot are admirable for the craft they exhibit, yet there is no strong moral or principle being played out. Koea, therefore,

---

<sup>45</sup> Mary Jo Putney, "Welcome to the Dark Side", in Krentz, Jayne Ann (ed.) op. cit., p. 100.

<sup>46</sup> Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance*, London, Verso, 1987, p. 14.

makes her own way, on a high wire, like Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poet-acrobat.

## CHAPTER II

### CHARACTERISATION

The most striking feature of Koea's characterisation is the repetition of character type. Elizabeth Newton, reviewing the second published work, concluded that Koea was "obsessed with widows".<sup>1</sup> This view is, no doubt, confirmed after a further three published works. Indeed, where the widow figure is not used in her stories, there remains the theme of marginalisation which is at the core of this character. It may not be uncommon for a novelist to repeat a particular character type in successive work, but it is unusual to give almost exclusive attention to that character, reflecting its tastes and concerns in both the content and style of the narrative, while the secondary characters act primarily as foils to the central character. The construction of the widow figure is inescapable in a study of Koea's work, since it is so frequently the starting point and the foundation on which the work rests. The danger of such repetition is monotony. Furthermore, while the narrative voice establishes self-pity, demonstrated in the widow character, and vindictiveness established in the characters with whom the widow is polarised, the reader experiences something else, even where (and, partly, because) the excesses are controlled by humour and self-deprecation. The voice of the author intrudes. Koea's own experience of widowhood and of marginalisation adds a degree of personal involvement, as if real life is romanticised and extreme identification is the impetus for the comic polarisation in the characterisation, as the widow figure is constructed as romantic heroine and those who oppose her as villains. Serious discussion is thus jeopardised.

The obvious autobiographical links can be listed quite simply. Koea records an unhappy and insecure childhood. Her husband, George Koea, whom she met while a journalist for the New Plymouth newspaper he edited, was twenty years her senior. He died in the garden of their large house, called "Grandiflora" which overlooks the sea. Koea has one grown son. About two years after her husband's death, she moved to Auckland to live in a cottage, filled with antiques. After being burgled a number of times, she moved into a high rise apartment for the safety and security of her person and possessions. New Plymouth can be recognised in the Hillingdon of *Sing to Me, Dreamer* and in *The Grandiflora Tree*, while the remaining two novels are set in Auckland. Koea claims:

I'm really very lazy. I always set a fiction in a known landscape...  
My main characters have moved - as I did - from large two-storied  
houses to cottages with long passages, like a knife in the heart,<sup>2</sup> and  
hung with portraits that are too large...I know what they think at

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Newton, *More*, March 1989, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> This simile is used twice in *Staying Home and Being Rotten* (pp. 104 and 105).

night, because I'm an insomniac. I roam around the house and look out of windows, just as my characters do. And they regard untenanted landscapes, often in the dim reaches, when everybody is away. There is always this isolation, and I feel that myself, really.<sup>3</sup>

The way Koea speaks here has the slow melancholy of the style of much of her narrative and, thus, of her protagonists also. Another interviewer noted Koea's own "courtesy, tact and decorum"<sup>4</sup> which are valued aspects of her characters. Like these characters she observes tidiness "to keep the larger chaos at bay",<sup>5</sup> lives frugally but with style ("I don't mean graces and airs. I mean it needn't be shabby..."<sup>6</sup>). Koea also points out that her characters

are often by themselves and they look out windows at night observing the weather and drawing conclusions from the weather or the state of the sky that fit in with how they're thinking. And I'm inclined to be like that myself, I call it reading the landscape.<sup>7</sup>

These basic elements are used in her work, as a starting point and as the background for the construction of her fictional world. Whatever their significance to the author personally, their use in the work is less real, in a "cardboard", or two-dimensional, construction with stock characters placed in opposition to one another in order to reinforce a set of pre-meditated values, or moral code, about how people should behave towards one another. While Kevin Ireland writes that Koea "transforms personal experience into imaginary constructions inhabited by glorious mutations",<sup>8</sup> the repetition is more obvious than any transformation.

More significant than the autobiographical links in the stories of Bernadette, Rosalind, Margaret and Elaine is the fact that they could be a continuation of the same character and even of the same story. Bernadette ends her story in retreat in the large house overlooking the sea where she has lived with her husband who was twenty years her senior and who died, while gardening, under the magnolia grandiflora tree. Rosalind, a few years after her husband's death, has lost her big house on the hill due to burglary and stock-market losses, and has moved into a cottage filled with her precious antiques. Elaine has been driven out of her cottage by successive burglaries to live in a high-rise apartment. Margaret could be the same character too, returning to her home town to reconcile past and present. Only her circumstances (notably that she has lived in India for twenty years) and hair colour mark her out as different. These

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Ireland, "Nightsapes", *Listener*, 8 August, 1992, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Wilson, "A Funny Correct Little Girl", *Quote Unquote*, July 1993, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Farmer, *Broadsheet*, Autumn 1993, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Ireland, loc. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Farmer, loc. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Ireland, "Icing on the cake", *Quote Unquote*, June 1996, p. 26.

characters have much in common. They were unappreciated, perhaps unloved or even beaten, as children (with the exception of Rosalind, whose childhood is not mentioned except in reference to her friendship with Dinah). They found strength and identity in marriage, which in two cases (Bernadette and Elaine) was the result of an office romance. They are all attractive women in their forties. All, except Margaret, have one or two grown sons who live far away, but communicate by letter or telephone. All are dependent upon the establishment of identity in terms of their house and possessions, in which they have similar tastes. Where these material things are taken or damaged, there is a loss of identity. There is always the threat that their possessions will be lost as they count their last pennies and assess what they can exchange for cash if necessary. None of them has a job (only Rosalind seeks and achieves one by the end of her story yet she still looks to Ben for "rescue" just as Margaret waits for Captain Kothari to rescue her from the circus where she has accidentally found employment at the end of her story). They eat very little due to lack of cash and emotional turmoil. (When "[m]oney in hand was running out" (*TGT*, 17), Bernadette digs up "rogue roots of potatoes" to make a meal; Rosalind's garden is like "a kind of small farm from which she harvests free crops" (*SHBR*, 159) and puts together a passable meal; Margaret (*SMD*) shares the elephant's buns delivered daily by the zoo; Elaine assembles the meagre contents of her fridge to "make a meal out of nothing" (*WBV*, 85).) They are often described as highly strung and eccentric, and have a touch of the drama queen (who seems to plead: "pity me"), the princess in the tower (whose plea could be: "rescue me"). All are in retreat, even hiding, feeling alienated from the society around them because, since widowhood, they have reverted to the unloved state of their childhood - unheard, vulnerable and inconvenient. All seek rescue which would mark the vindication of their right to a happy ending. The widow character, thus, becomes romantic heroine and, as if to enable our indulgence of such a notion, the stories are suffused with comic overtones.

The beginning of each novel establishes the comic terms in which we are to see the characters, despite the serious theme of marginalisation, and its related issues, that Koea wishes to address. Thus, the portrayal of Rosalind, in *Staying Home*, declares its comic intention from the first page by a mix of the serene and the macabre.

The parcel from James arrived three days before Christmas when the white roses in the front garden had finished flowering. It was also the day on which ended the High Court trial of a man accused of dis-embowelling a woman just up the street, but as most of its residents (including Rosalind) did not get the newspaper regularly this melodrama left the neighbour-hood untouched.

The area's various dogs, a brindled and motley muster of hounds with large teeth, had not howled either in unison or separately for nearly a week. For a similar length of time the police, with the usual reinforcements, had not slipped down that lane in squad cars to investigate petty larceny, domestic violence or the ravishment of women, or men, whose clothing was already tattered with lack of innocence. The whole place, it seemed, had hushed itself in preparation for the arrival of James's package, as a theatre may be quietened for the beginning of a charade. Only the postman,

undeterred, had made any noise, and he had just been prophetically whistling *Hello Dolly* as he went along the road delivering mail that day. (1)

Firstly, the pleasant scene of white roses lifts the narrative to a genteel plane. This is undercut by the contrast of "disembowelling" in the second sentence, which, in turn is undercut by the word "melodrama" which hints at the degree of unreality intended. Once again, excesses in the language give the scene of local crime a Dickensian flavour ("clothing...tattered with lack of innocence") which distances the reader. Finally the mention of "theatre", "charade" and the postman whistling *Hello, Dolly*, tells us that this is a scene to enjoy rather than to take seriously. More to the point, this is the scene which the widow character inhabits, and while it is clear that she is seriously frightened by her lack of money and James's threatened reappearance, her fears never become truly sinister to the reader.

The serious-comic mix, therefore, undermines the seriousness of Rosalind's concerns. The descriptions of the violent events in the neighbourhood are made to seem horrific, yet are casually dismissed as comic melodrama. The genteel Rosalind's fascination with the scene of the dumping of a car used in a bank robbery is comic, as she slips through her hedge to get a closer look at the police chalk-marks (60). It is even more comic that she identifies with the burglars, who have gone to ground in her neighbourhood, just as it is comic (again, because it seems so unlikely) that she identifies with the brindled dogs who live in the middle of the road and who leave her alone, recognising a fellow "lost plunderer" (179). While we may accept the comparison, dismissing it as comedy and an illustration of Rosalind's self-deception, our credibility is strained by the more extreme example of Rosalind's identification with the blacks of racially segregated South Africa. Here it is that her polarisation from James is established and, in the "yellow eyes" of the people who live in the forbidden streets beyond her hotel in Johannesburg she walks unharmed and imagines she sees their recognition of another member "of a lost legion who searched for something that was not available. Freedom, respect, *egalite*, love" (102). The reader remains unconvinced, but is entertained by her self-deception nevertheless.

That the widow character is set at the centre of a work which is primarily entertainment while, simultaneously, attempting to address the serious issue of marginalisation, is evident also from the beginnings of the next two novels. Much of the entertainment is centred on Koea's cutting exposé of human behaviour, shown in the values systems of the society which her major characters inhabit and which marginalise her widow character, and in her characterisation of the minor characters. *Sing to Me, Dreamer* begins with very humorous observations about socialisation as Goldblatt advises Margaret to make "some attempt to fit in" (1). Irony is used to show what such attempts at conformity have done for the small town in which the book is set, as Margaret reflects on the generation before them: "Goldblatt's father was a butcher with a canny eye on the offal and a taste for small windows" (1) and "[m]y mother was a great one for the well-cut suit in all seasons, with a brooch at the lapel. Linen or silk in



the summer; pure wool in winter, the odd little cashmere jersey. That was Mother. I wear saris, or Indian trousers in muslin with tunics over the top" (2). Margaret's failure to conform, in fact her dogged determination not to, becomes the centre of the entertainment and the action of the novel. Hers is the most obvious marginalisation of the four widow characters because she is visually different, not just marginalised by her widowhood or her sudden dependence on others who do not have her best interests at heart, or by social disapproval.

At the start of *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista* wistfulness is soon overtaken by humour as the narrator considers the other inhabitants of the apartment building, and the heroine, with typical self-pity, weeps because

in ten or fifteen or twenty year's time, she divined she might be just like them. She might be a complaining selfish woman with a narrow face like that of a rat looking out of a hay bale and she would grumble about footsteps, sounds made by strangers passing innocently in the street outside, couples kissing under the trees and possibly even the colour of the leaves on the hedge next door which might not be sufficiently autumnal for her taste. (2)

We might have indulged her self-pity somewhat more easily were it not for the image of the rat in the hay bale. All the same, we are required to take seriously, right from the beginnings of their stories, that both Margaret and Elaine feel different from the others around them and fear becoming like them. The endings are an indication of their success: Margaret runs off to join a circus, leaving behind the town where "men like Goldblatt live in a state of magnificance with splintery reproduction furniture and wives who smell of perfume too expensive and too liberally applied too early in the morning to thighs and arms dimpled with cellulite" (167)<sup>9</sup> and Elaine is very easily rescued from her tower by a fireman and departs on her fairy tale ending while the other occupants peer from behind their curtains and create a fuss about the evacuation. For the reader, however, the air of unreality which surrounds the heroines in both stories, gives the message that their socialisation is only avoidable (and that the happy resolution of the avoidance of socialisation is only possible) in such fiction, in which the mix of comedy and fantasy allows a happy ending.

Fairy tale imagery is used consistently in the characterisation of the widow figure, and is part of the artificial world which Koea creates in which to juxtapose her polarised characters and engineer their just desserts. All her heroines feel unloved, outside the protection of their marriages which have all ended tragically. So Koea constructs a romantic heroine from her widow character, with the promise of a second chance at a happy ending. In her youth, Elaine has been rescued like Cinderella by her handsome prince. In her widowhood, she becomes a princess in a tower constructing a new life by means of a sham wedding, so that the status of marriage will provide her with protection from her own naivety. Bernadette, who had also been rescued, Cinderella-like by her (albeit unprince-like) husband, now inhabits a slightly

---

<sup>9</sup> Vindictiveness is stronger than comedy in such acid comments as this, in Koea's writing.

Gothic fairy tale world, surrounded by ogre-like furniture, retreating to her tower in the house perched above the sea, pacing moonlit corridors. Rosalind, removed by widowhood from her first happy-ever-after ending, is now in a story reminiscent of "Beauty and the Beast" for she (Beauty) has retreated to the sanctuary and benediction of her little house and garden in an area of "lawless lanes" (4) after her emotional battering by James (the Beast), for the "anonymity of the area's pathways...gave shelter to thieves, scatterlings of all kinds, who fled from debt, failure or their own stupidity, and innocents whose brains were seamed with betrayal by those who professed false love" (60). In the sanctuary of her enclosed garden, she constructs her own reality and awaits rescue.

Rosalind's is the least fairy-tale-like ending because she writes it herself. This is despite (indeed the narrative persuades us, because of) the hard lessons she has learned, as a measure of which, we learn that her first published poem was *The Rose*, while by the end of the book her latest, less publishable, poem is the hardier perennial *The Geranium*. By her own efforts (which are outwardly passive) she has constructed her own defence from isolation: a wall of words against the invasions of others indicated throughout the book by seemingly non-committal responses such as "'I see.' (Another brick.)" (141). This wall of words enables Rosalind to write her own "fairy story" and exclude James, so that by the end of the book she has not been enticed to London by him, but:

'England?' says Rosalind. 'I just went there for a while.'  
There is a silence. 'I studied art at the Tate...' (187)

(This is, in part, true for she spent a great deal of time at the Gallery, avoiding James.) James has been constructing his own "fairy story", as Rosalind discovers in a phone conversation with Priscilla.

'He told me...that you were a very high-ranking headmistress of  
a notable school.'  
'He told me you were a world-famous novelist here to sign a film  
contract, under a *nom de plume*...' (78)

At the end, she is diverted to discover Dinah picking up the story of James which Rosalind has written herself out of. Dinah is stressed by the sorry story of her client who "rang up in a terrible state because she suspects that this manipulative man who intermittently takes over her life while giving nothing, this man, Rosalind, has some other woman right here, Rosalind, actually in this city" and, despairing, adds with unwitting comic irony: "'Why can't some of these people see their lives as a verbalised and endured fiction, Rosalind, just like you?'" (184).

Margaret's story is the most exotic of the fairy tales, an amalgam of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and *The Arabian Nights*. Margaret, the first of the widow characters to narrate her own story, describes herself as she might be seen by others: "a pantomime jade who has slept in her costume after *Aladdin and His Magic Lamp*"

(127). Her fairy tale of the past has been more dramatic than that of the other widows, for she has run off, through a storm, to be the concubine of an adoring Indian Maharajah, in a pink palace of her own, with a fountain and Perisian roses in the garden. Her loss of all this brings her to a state from which she must be rescued once again, by a fairy tale ending, and her story is about how this is achieved, with "a demonic ride through a storm-swept forest", "a couple of armed assassins" and "a victory charge with a cavalry sabre".

The traditional elements are all there - innocence surrounded by evil, tyrannical parents, the escape through the stormy forest, the romance of faraway places, the fairy prince, and finally the tension of that time-honoured mystery, the locked room (which reveals all).<sup>10</sup>

Margaret's ending, at a circus, yet awaiting the arrival of the enigmatic Captain Kothari and the resumption of her dream-like Indian story (if in a slightly humbler form) is a fairy tale ending more exotic than that of Elaine. However, it is a more persuasive ending within the confines of its fictional world because the balance of the serious and the comic, the real and the fantastic, is more successfully sustained. The extent of the polarisation created in the story, damning the small town of Hillingdon and its inherent values, has made any other kind of ending unimaginable for this character who is unable to compromise and whose attire makes her so visibly different.

The polarisation of characters in the novels is achieved, in the first instance, by the narrative's sympathetic treatment of the heroine. Thus, the narrative reflects her tastes in manners, clothes, furniture, gardens and people. The narrative tone is also consistent and sympathetic to the central character because it echoes her quiet manner and precious sensibilities, as illustrated in the following extract:

On the day the three buds on 'Peace' opened, Rosalind also began to open the parcel. It was some time in the hiatus between Christmas and New Year, after Benjamin's visit...The day was very hot and still, and early in the afternoon the silence in the limpid lanes became profound. Everyone had gone away, Rosalind thought, or had gone to sleep or died, and in this deathly hush she began to unwrap the gift. (62)

The action of opening the parcel is approached circuitously, comparing it to the opening of a significantly named rose, setting the scene and establishing an atmosphere appropriate to what seems to be a simple act, but which we are left in no doubt is loaded with emotional significance. This is common in Koea's narratives. There is not a pause, but a "hiatus"; the streets become, alliteratively, "limpid lanes", and that there is some reason for a "deathly hush" is established. Thus, the tone of the narrative - polite, decorous, almost old-fashioned in its choice of vocabulary - asserts a kind of superiority of heightened feelings because the widow character is similarly possessed of impeccable manners and a sense of decorum with which she disguises her fear. By this

---

<sup>10</sup> Ian Gordon, "Trick lies in the but", *New Zealand Herald*, 15 Oct. 1994, 3:7.

means a system of values, a moral code, is established. The heroine is thereby distinguished from the less desirable characters and kept at a respectable and tasteful distance from them.

It is by means of dialogue that less desirable characters are polarised and allowed to reveal themselves as being outside the established moral code:

'I know what you could do, Rosie,' James had said in London. 'You could write a book, a real book - not all that poetry and stuff you waste time on. There's no money in that, Rosie, none at all. Everything about you needs to be more gaudy. If you wrote something really gaudy, something disgusting, if you wrote something filthy you could make a fortune. You've got some brains, haven't you?' She had said nothing, and he tapped on her forehead with the knuckle of one finger. 'Knock, knock, anyone home? Got a few brains, have you? Well? (49)

That Rosalind's response is silence is used to highlight James's bad taste in a continuing polarisation of opposites: good taste versus lack of taste, love versus lust, frugality versus gluttony, volubility versus silence, and so on, which becomes part of the characterisation in all of the work. Bernadette also uses silence:

'Silence,' said Mrs Crichton, 'is a terrible weapon...I read that in a book once. It said, "Silence is the clearest message you can send."...' (85)

Rosalind's silence is similarly articulate. Furthermore, she sends a coded message to Priscilla (another of James's women whom she has befriended over the telephone) in the form of a print of a satyr cavorting with nymphs. Similarly, Margaret and the Maharanee communicate by picture postcards with no written message. The card Margaret sends shows:

...a terrace bright with red geraniums, a pretty iron table to one side and an empty chair facing a view of the sea. A newspaper lies, carelessly thrown down, on the flagstones beside the chair. No person is present. Whoever was there has now gone, fled on some other business or perhaps summoned by bad news, but the terrace has charm and promise of a comfortable return because the chair is exquisite and the newspaper may be only half-read. The flowers are beautiful and the sky serene. Out of emptiness may come tranquillity, from journeys there could be glad returns. That is what I want to tell her... (135)

The coarse language exhibited by the undesirable characters is only ever assumed by the heroines in times of dire need (Bernadette's notice outside her front door begins "*Bereavement Callers Respectfully Declined*" (11) and eventually becomes "*Go Away*" (136)), after which politeness reasserts itself. Manners are the last defence for Koea's beleaguered heroine and are of advantage to her. They allow her to remain

circumspect and distant from characters who do not mean well. They are an advantage in other ways too. Rosalind secures a job because her prospective employers are impressed by her quietness and her manners which they find preferable to those of other salespeople they refer to as "the glossy brigade" (187). Rosalind's manners have also allowed her to keep her dignity during the episode with James, when making a fuss would have had the opposite effect. When she threatens to go to the police to report his withholding her passport and air ticket, he simply laughs, for he is notorious with them and is pleased that his stories of romantic misadventure have even made the pages of *The News of the World*. Attention is often drawn to the widow character's politeness by her mimicry of the language of the characters who are placed in opposition to her. Margaret imitates Goldblatt's toadying informality and diminutives by referring to him as "Goldie" and, when truly afraid, she imitates the vernacular of the Americans who visited her garden in India as she tries to impress the seriousness of her situation upon her lawyer:

'...there's a brother involved, too, so it's hopeless calling the police because he's engaged to the sister of one of the constables so they all think the light of day shines out of his Goddamn ass...And if it comes to some kind of confrontation about who's got the best ass and the best light shining out of it I aim to be the Godamn winner any day of the week.' (145)

Similarly, Elaine imitates the coarse language and behaviour of the loud women she has observed at the shopping centre. However, behaving badly is so alien to her that she goes to the library to find a book about how to be nasty, hoping to find titles such as: "*How to be Worse, How to be Successful, How to be a Real Live Bitch and Get Away With It, Successful Bastards and How They Did It*" (96). In all cases, the characters are trying out an alternative way of behaving, and all reject it for politeness in the end. In *Staying Home and Being Rotten* the behaviour of the subsidiary characters Priscilla, Phyllis, Roberta and Lorraine is set against that of Rosalind as examples of ineffectively asserting oneself. The fact that, at the end of the story, two of these are patients of Rosalind's friend Dinah, the psychiatrist, is indicative of this.

Further polarisation between the "good" and "bad" characters occurs in that the heroine is distinguished from those who oppose her by her impeccable good taste, not just in manners, but in such material objects as clothing, perfume and, particularly, her knowledge of antiques. The recognition of this good taste by particular characters distinguishes them from the predatory, for they too understand true value. Benjamin (*SHBR*), who is placed in contrast to James, is always "civilised" (104), wears Fahrenheit by Christian Dior, admires Rosalind's china and gives her a Ming tea

bowl.<sup>11</sup> Thus, those who are sympathetic toward the heroine can be recognised by a combination of good taste in their dress and in their behaviour toward her. Koea's considerable knowledge of antiques not only adds authenticity to the descriptions of furniture, jewellery and artwork in the narrative, and gives the books a very appealing, and stage-managed, *House and Garden* atmosphere, but is an element of the characterisation. It is by the quality of these possessions that we can recognise the heroine as a person of discerning taste in both material objects and in character.

Simply the outward appearance of good taste in dress on its own may be an indication of self-indulgence, as is the case with Manfred in "The Tea Party" and in "Edward and Lally/Ted and Pam" (*FRBC*). In the latter story, Edward and Lally are merely fashion victims, dictated to by interior designers and plastic surgeons so that their characters suffer for this over-indulgence in outward display. However, Anthony in "The Magic Way" recognises the language of style and its parallels with personality, designing his garden to suit the character of Mac of whom he has hopes, and when that falls through, redesigning it to suit Roberto.<sup>12</sup> Ben's house in *Staying Home*, is very bland, if beautiful, and it is significant that he asks Rosalind to add touches of her own. The real "heroes" are not only beautifully dressed, but also solicitous toward the heroine. They speak to her of flowers like Lewis in "Now Leapt the Blithe Morning" (*WWNWH*), Slingsby in "The Antique Dealer" (*FRBC*), and Richard Sinclair in *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista*. Recognising her superior qualities, characters such as Thortenson in "The Dancing Master" (*WWNWH*), Ranji in *Sing to Me* and David in *The Wedding* single her out for special attention. They share her tastes in art and furniture, as do Henry in "To the Taj Mahal" (*WWNWH*) and Ben in *Staying Home*. They are her justification and validation. Hence, there is a simplistic division between characters who are sympathetic to the central character and those who are predatory and insensitive.

Such a simplistic division lends itself to humour, and it is the comic aspect of Koea's writing which saves the reader from being constantly obliged to share the widow's wallowing in a mire of alternating self-pity and self-congratulation, and rescues the predator from complete vindictiveness. The humour manifests itself in a tongue-in-cheek tone in the narrative, a kind of self-deprecation on the part of the widow figure at times, and exaggeration in the portrayal of the predatory character. This indicates that Koea is not taking the characters quite seriously and that they are, as Jane Stafford claimed with reference to *Sing to Me, Dreamer*, involved in a plot which

---

<sup>11</sup> To further the contrast with James, Ben's only association with violence is manifested in his employee, Wally, who is on medication but is fine during the day. "It's in the evening, when he's been smoking pot and drinking that he gets violent, but the counselling's helping" Ben reassures Rosalind.(157) That the stock, numbered B29, that Ben sends from his warehouse for Rosalind to approve, is bed-linen embroidered with roses is a further indication that everything becomes civilised in Ben's hands.

<sup>12</sup> In this story the contents of one's supermarket shopping basket also speak volumes about one's character or the state of one's relationships.

is "comic and deliberately cardboard".<sup>13</sup> This kind of comment has been made before about Koea's work. Iain Sharp commented that the character Rosalind is like Minnie Mouse trying to play Anna Karenina, but adds that to criticise her for this would be like quibbling that cartoon characters have only three fingers.<sup>14</sup> Presumably, like Stafford, he recognised the deliberate degree of caricature in the characterisation, and indeed, in the whole working of the plot. However, credibility (that is, for the story within its limited frame of reference as fantasy) is strained where the comedy is less evident, so that we do seem to be required to take the characters more seriously, as if they inhabit a reality beyond the confines of the cardboard construction.

The characters who prey on the heroine are the most comically rendered. They are almost always male, the notable exceptions being Goldblatt's wife, Muriel, in *Sing to Me*, and the relatives in "Oh Bunny" and "Mrs Pratt Goes to China" (*WWNWH*). In *The Grandiflora Tree* it is the dead husband, Charlie, whose predation is revealed as the novel progresses, and the widow gains further insight into his character in his discovered diaries. The predation is often associated with gluttony (in contrast to the heroines' subsisting on barely anything) and lust, so that the character assumes cartoon-like proportions similar to an horrific/comic mix of Billy Bunter and the Marquis de Sade. Charlie's diary of his trip to Britain seems to recount mainly what food he ate and what girls he met. The complete entry for one day records:

*24 August:* The Scottish tour continues. For breakfast this morning I had eggs, mushrooms, sausages, rashers of bacon, bread rolls, butter and marmalade. (125)

and another:

*3 September:* I got my diary up to date this morning. Later John and I took the two girls out to Holyrood Park where we had lunch on the hills overlooking the city, partly obscured by thick haze. We had tea together (scones, pikelets and mixed cakes some of which were not very nice but I managed to get quite a nice one with pink icing and a cherry on), then we took the girls to a film. I finished the day by going to see Pamela Russell. Dear old Pamela. She is not getting any younger, but she has not lost her zest. (127)

His avarice is further accentuated by his recording the cost of his food, and by a kind of glee when he managed to acquire a free meal or free accommodation. He keeps a green notebook for the telephone numbers of girls he meets, and another to record his expenses.

No more interesting phone numbers for my green notebook so I can leave that safely tucked away for the moment. My expenditure notebook has got somewhat behind in the last few

<sup>13</sup> Jane Stafford, *Landfall*, Autumn 1995, p. 162.

<sup>14</sup> Iain Sharp, "Minnie Mouse plays Anna Karenina", *New Zealand Books*, Dec. 1992, p. 7.

days what with all this excitement over country teas at no expense and meeting with exquisite female creatures who possess peculiar accents and eat winkles. (120)

James, in *Staying Home*, has the sadism if not the gluttony:

'What do you think I brought you here for, Rosie?'  
The hands had gone round her throat, pinning her  
to the brown wall that was the colour of old blood (95).

Like Charlie, he keeps a list of women, which extends worldwide.

'I'm spending the last fortnight in Adelaide with Margaret. She's another naughty little thing who likes three in a bed, but she's got a friend there who's a good little sport, so that's Australia under control. There's only you, Rosie, being rotten about it all. You're the fly in the ointment. You're only two miles from Lorraine's place, and if I could just get you two girls all set up -' (69).

James's character is echoed in Adrian Bunce, in *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista*, who whispers with lustful suggestiveness through the letter slot of Elaine's door. His voice is "sibilant" like James's and like Manfred's in the short story "The Tea Party" (*FRBC*). Adrian, James and Manfred dress impeccably, but this outward display of good taste is not to be trusted. The material possessions can be a trap: Manfred wears expensive and immaculate clothes, but his conversation reveals his cruelty to his late wife and he assesses his widowed hostess and her possessions with pecuniary interest as he scoffs her food. His hostess (unnamed) has found him attractive partly because of his exquisite clothes but she soon discovers that they do not reflect taste in all things:

...she thought, suddenly, that he could be a man who was unpleasant over the cost of butter, or flour, or sugar. Or anything. Very unpleasant. But not about his own clothes. His clothes - and she looked him up and down - were verging on majestic. The jacket hung in such soft loose folds that it must be raw silk. His cream shirt fluttered faintly. Silk again. And his shoes were of cream suede, without a mark, and held his long slim feet tightly and fondly as a - but she stopped there. (76)

What she subsequently discovers about him leads her to fantasise about burying an axe in his skull, but she decides on the more practical alternative of locking the gate.

Koea repeatedly uses lustfulness and gluttony to damn her villains. Goldblatt in *Sing to Me*, also dresses well, drives a silver Mercedes, and is lustful for money as well as for his mistress, Gloria Thorpy, in Sydney. His fate as a foil in this case is also shown through his obesity ("His thighs are blubbery..." (1)). He orders coffee from his secretary:

"And with cream today, Daphne. Two spoons of brown sugar. And I'll have a bagel". (5)



He, too, takes on cartoon-like proportions with his "grabby, splatter of [a] name"<sup>15</sup> and his lustful antics with Gloria, in which scene food imagery occurs:

Goldblatt's voice, echoing over the line from Sydney, sounds yellow with satisfaction, glutenous with delight. He is exactly like a talking custard. (139)

The humour used in the descriptions of the predatory character lessens the threat he poses, however, at least as far as the reader is concerned. He can only ever be slightly sinister because his portrayal is comic, like the gluttonous, lustful, predatory character taken to extremes in "The Widow" (*FRBC*) in which the aptly named Bunty:

looked about him with a rising lust, attention equally divided between pale flesh and the luminous glow of starched dinner napkins placed in formation beside a mountain of sausage rolls. Most of the furniture could be placed in his own home, he thought, and stared at the Derby. (130)

Although food imagery is used elsewhere in Koea's writing to create this horrific/comic effect, nowhere is it taken to such extremes. Bunty takes his leave after the wake, clasping "one of her hands between his own and there it remained like the sparse filling in a hamburger bun" (133) and waits through the winter for "the joint attritions of weather, fright and solitude to do their work upon her" before making his move.

The frost of her gathering distress would have the enveloping delicacy of meringue on Queen Pudding. He licked his lips and watched the newspaper for terrifying incidents in her town, and was well rewarded. (133-134)

These predatory characters become larger than life in more ways than one. They become representative of all that is contemptible in men who abuse their power, while the caricature lessens the threat they might pose if they were treated with a greater degree of realism.

Juxtaposed with the predatory character, or villain, is the romantic heroine. As we have seen, the fantasy world she inhabits is established early in each novel. *The Grandiflora Tree* is no exception:

On the nights following the finding of the body beneath the grandiflora tree Mrs Crichton stood in the upstairs window embrasures and watched lightning claw at the headland upon which the house perched. (7)

This places the heroine/widow character in a Disney-like Gothic scene which is not too scary because the formality of the name "Mrs Crichton" and the words "grandiflora" and "embrasures" add a touch of old-fashioned gentility. This kind of fairy-tale

---

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Ireland, "Staying Home and Being Normal", *Quote Unquote*, Nov. 1994, p. 24.

imagery is used throughout the book, with Bernadette (Mrs Crichton) like a princess imprisoned in her huge house, woken by bad dreams, walking about in the night "along the upstairs hall illuminated only by the moon" (18), formulating a framework "like a skeleton" (28) to regulate her days, performing small tasks like "rib-bones to support the cadaverous days" (30), and her bedroom "possessed all the charm of a chamber in a tower" (130).

That this is a comic rendition of the heroine is indicated by the excesses in the language, but also in the unexpectedness of some of the heroine's utterances and behaviour, and in the things people say about her. Thus, the romantic heroine is also a comic heroine. In a riotous mix of metaphors Bernadette identifies with the caged animals in the zoo and with the hunter in the wild, taking meaning from the weather as rolls of thunder punctuate the nights. Her husband's desk "seemed like a ship" (49), but Bernadette is "the captain now" (50), although just a few pages before she was "like a person adrift" (34), and her nightdress is "like the caress of the smallest waves in the summer sea" (62). Bernadette's sudden, pragmatic comment: "I seem to be the only damned thing left alive round here" (31), following a melancholy little scene in which she has wandered about the garden and made a "pilgrimage" to the old cat's grave, is humorous because it is unexpected, contrasting in tone and mood with the scene before, and suggesting that the character is not as fanciful or self-pitying as the narrative might suggest. Observations people make about her become humorous because they reveal something unexpected about the character. In the instance below, the reader discovers that the widow is not the archetypal grey-haired widow at all, but an agile, much younger woman. It also is comic in revealing the prejudices and inhibiting social conventions espoused by the observers:

We were...quite shocked to see you yourself doing what I believe is called a scissors over the gate to leave the property, hardly what would be expected from the widow of a prominent man, but, as we said again, she lives in her own little artistic world and if the error was pointed out kindly she would see how bad it looks. (38)

Bernadette's behaviour, particularly her morbid enjoyment of her self-pity, also becomes a source of humour:

Her grim dereliction...was harder to bear than the content of the sad novels she devoured though their titles mirrored the extent of the disaster. *The Valley of Bones* provided a week's entertainment. It was followed by *After the Revolution*, *In the Forest*, *A Sense of Unreality*, *The Lost Pharoahs*, *The Last Battle*, *An Ear of the Dragon* and so on. These names, coupled with the sobbing cries of seabirds driven inland by winter storms, brought an obscure but marked comfort in the midst of manifold obliquities. If such cries and words were uttered or written with impunity, screamed from the heavens by feathered multitudes or available freely from any library shelf, surely, she thought, she was not alone and was thus heartened. (101-102)

The humour saves the romantic heroine from seeming completely pathetic, while it also

undermines any serious message she may embody, just as the humour in the portrayal of the predatory character lessens his power to threaten. Consequently, two "types" are juxtaposed: the romantic heroine who is naive, gentle, well-mannered, and made vulnerable by her feeling unloved, and the predator who may be outwardly presentable but is selfish, lustful, and usurious. The result is a simplistic, polarised world like that of allegory or fable in which the establishment of a moral code, judging the heroine's marginalisation as wrong, must be vindicated in the working out of the story. Thus, the romantic heroine's reward of a happy ending is the inevitable result of the narrative's (albeit tongue-in-cheek) approach to the whole construction of what is essentially a fairy story. The predatory male also, like the villain in a fairy tale, receives his just desserts.

Neither is a happy ending in store for the secondary characters who offend against the moral code by actively reinforcing the marginalisation of the widow character. Instead, there is a strong sense of revenge, or vindictiveness, in the acid and humorous narrative tone which accompanies their characterisation. Margaret's encroaching neighbour is only ever called "The Arsehole", the windows of his house are a bile yellow colour, his arms are hairy, his threatening note has him sounding belligerent and barely literate. Goldblatt's wife, Muriel, is the "chatelaine of Chateau Goldblatt" (*SMD*, 56), with a voice "bold as a bandsaw" (55), arms large enough to feed a regiment and "a mouth as big as a cushion" (56). She is "Muriel, the Labrador" (63), "Muriel the Valkyrie" (64), "Muriel the iconoclast" (67). Significantly, her lack of taste is a strong point against her. Her house in which "richness and parsimony balanced" (55) "sits on a hilltop, a vast bay window in the early Elizabethan style, like an architectural paunch, sagging on to a newly formed rose garden. Muriel and I are sitting on a velvet love seat within the cavernous interior of this glassy gizzard..." (54). Muriel wears too much make-up ("eye lashes tarred with mascara" (54)), too much perfume, and gives Margaret advice about how to dress, yet

If I were back in my pink house, with the towers of the City Palace on a hilltop to the east and my own garden where Persian roses grew, I would be correctly dressed and jewelled and Muriel Goldblatt would be considered the frump amongst espiocrats there. Every detail of her appearance would be reported back to the palace by the network of staff and their relatives that populated my small estate like a gang of spies, and Muriel would be found to be sadly lacking. (67)

Placed against this apparently preferable "network", the social structure of Hillingdon comes under attack for its hierarchy in which "the Goldblatts talk to the Baileys and the Baileys talk to the Prendergasts and the Prendergasts talk to God" (77). Family loyalties come before justice. The police will take no action to forestall Margaret's trespassing neighbour and, furthermore, the sister of one of the constables is engaged to the neighbour's brother. They regard Margaret's strangeness patronisingly, advising counselling.

Revenge must be exacted on characters who offend against the heroine and who, therefore, break the moral code. In *The Grandiflora Tree* the bereavement callers become the butt of numerous jibes from the narrator, such as in the observation that they are "like those who visit hospitals to see patients in traction, autographing plaster casts with jolly flourishing signatures" (101). Bernadette, feeling "doomed to be excluded from proper life forever" (134) for "Charlie, by dying, had committed the social crime of frightening people about death and the smear of his misdeed lay upon her" (101) summons up a kind of revenge. Most of Chapter Eleven is given to the sarcastic replies she writes (but possibly does not send) detailing the offences of the letters of bereavement she has received, and one of her replies concludes:

I am afraid I must utter the dreaded words, 'Neither called upon nor calling at present.' I have had to make this unfortunate remark to so very many people who, like yourself, have been most anxious that I understand perfectly how frightful everything is now and how I will have to sell my house and buy a tiny flat and eke out an existence of the most boring and skimpy sort until I die too. The kindness and sweetness of such people has been too great a benefit for me to bear so I am unable to ask you to call again. (111)

Similarly, the invitations "coming over the telephone line like a clarion call to duty and extinction" cause her to behave badly knowing she would "either be treated with a terrified pity, frightening kindness or stealthy condescension that was almost vengeful" (97). She dresses inappropriately and takes some delight in scaring people.

'If I were you I'd watch him,' she used to say at dinner parties when, clad in those boots and jeans, she sat swinging her legs over the arms of someone's sofa, watching someone's husband erupt forth with a nose-bleed. 'You'd better watch him like a hawk,' she would say. 'It looks like high blood pressure to me.' ...They shrank then from her horrifying truths about their state, seeing in her eyes that she was assessing them with macabre authority, that her measuring look fell upon them all with a telling accuracy. (99)

In fact, Bernadette is no ministering angel of death, but has recognised, with "telling accuracy", her friends' fears in her company and is playing on them out of revenge for the failure to take her feelings into consideration.

A vehement revenge is effected in *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista* for the repeated burgling of Elaine's cottage which has caused her to attempt suicide and eventually to retreat to the safety of an apartment building. The burglars in this novel are a notable departure from Koea's usual character types, and are a useful contrast. They mark what may be a "more ambitious" direction in her work and provide "differing viewpoints"<sup>16</sup> from those of her polarised characters. In their characterisation there is more of the cutting edge of Maurice Gee than could have been thought possible

---

<sup>16</sup> Graeme Lay, "Elaine's wedding", *North & South*, Aug. 1996, p. 152.

in Koea's work. Furthermore, there is no sympathy for these burglars now they have turned their attentions on the widow and, one by one, they are punished for it. Elaine is directly, but unwittingly, involved in two of the deaths. She dials a wrong number which rings in the cereal factory one of the burglars has illegally entered and, startled by the telephone ringing, he overbalances into a vat of sesame seeds and drowns. In the second, the youngest of the burglars, aged ten and deaf, recognises her crossing a railway overbridge and, thus distracted, fails to realise that a train is approaching him from behind. Neither his violent childhood and his deafness, a result of untreated glue ear and battering, nor the fact that he has been picked up hungry from the street by criminals who, Fagin-like use him as their Artful Dodger, save him from a grisly end. The third burglar is found in pieces, washed up on a beach. It is hinted that his death is at the hands of his "fence" whose orders for stolen goods cannot be filled by the third burglar now his two accomplices are gone. The details of his death and dismemberment are not spared the reader who learns:

In subsequent days one leg was found, also the torso. Searches failed to turn up the head and the other leg...the fingertips had been removed from the hands shortly after death, probably to prevent identification...the arm must have had an identifying mark of some kind, possibly a tattoo...which the perpetrators of the dismemberment and the dumping had removed...[and] who also stabbed the owner of the punctured torso sixteen times with a large long-bladed knife, the first wound fatally penetrating the heart. Fifteen other blows had met a mark after death on that battered torso, mostly in the area of the heart or upper thoracic cavity, and had been administered with violence. (173)

There is some holding back, in that it is somehow discernible that the first wound caused the death, and that the subsequent blows were inflicted after death. Nevertheless, Koea's characterisation of the burglars is not comic, but is the closest she has come to realism. The only comic thing about them is the name of the Chinese takeaway shop they frequent: the Gung Ho. The narrative reflects bitter humour and contempt, not for the burglars, who have broken the moral code, but this time for the people they burgle. This matches the contempt of the burglars for their victims:

They all understood that she and her possessions were there for the taking, that they could get in any time, so they came to have a kind of contempt for her because she seemed so available, almost boringly easy. (58)

Two pages are devoted to carefully building a picture of the brother and sister entrepreneurs who share a renovated Victorian cottage with their BMW parked outside and who negotiated life's "financial challenges and cycles with the agility of dancers" (60). The brother's life is described as "a financial pirouette, which faltered slightly the night the boy [the burglar] thought he pulled off the best move of his life" (60). All their careful efforts are for nothing and, after the burglary, "They repaid their debts and ceased to traffic in property. Their hope and their trust in the world...had all gone" (62). Thus, there is a mixture of contempt and pity in the description of the outcomes for the

victims. On the other hand, the burglars remain oblivious to the effects of their crimes as they:

went through the suburb as a cyclone may move along a street:  
a roof off here, a house demolished there, the ones in between  
untouched, a garden completely swirled up into the air and the  
area left a waste ground, the garden next door completely  
untouched, the golden dahlias luscious with radiant blooms and  
fat caterpillars munching happily at the flowers' hearts,  
danger undetected. (62)

The marginalisation of people, and the solutions to the same, are also discussed more seriously in this novel than they have been in the previous works. Elaine recalls her unhappy childhood when, with other outcasts at school, she was relegated to the shady side of the playground. Now, for the first time, the widow character not only questions her marginalisation but wonders what she could have done, and can still do, to prevent it.

And suddenly she understood perfectly...that it was all her  
fault...That she had been her own silent enemy, that her  
acceptance of bad behaviour had made bad behaviour acceptable  
from earliest childhood. By not stating her needs ever, or rarely  
and then only in the quietest of voices, it had been thought that  
she had none, that she could put up with anything. (88)

She wonders if her life might have been different if she and her playmates had stood up to the others and if she had stood up to the nurses who gossiped openly about her, speculated about her marital status, and tried on her diamond ring and watch when she was in hospital having her first child while her husband was overseas on business. Now, she is emboldened by her success in getting the dishwasher of which the previous owners of the apartment had defrauded her, and contacts an old friend and invites her for coffee, then places an advertisement in the newspaper for a reunion of her school friends from the shady side of the playground. Yet Elaine is a less spirited, more disillusioned, more sinned against, widow character than her predecessors and this is reflected in the differences in this last novel. The bitterness, regret and humiliation of successive victimisations by burglary are not easily overcome. While all of these emotions afflict Rosalind in *Staying Home and Being Rotten*, they are not as keenly portrayed as in this novel and for Elaine there is no becoming "as bad as everyone else" (177) which is Rosalind's choice. The ending for Elaine is the most passive of the endings, and the most disappointing for the reader, particularly since Elaine has shown the capacity to change her life.<sup>17</sup> She is whisked away by Richard Sinclair for a picnic of strawberries and champagne; a fairy tale ending, in which natural justice prevails for the burglars, not arrest, imprisonment or a chance to reform, and a happy ending is the heroine's reward, in Koea's cardboard cut-out world. Elaine began the book preparing for her secret, imaginary wedding by readying the ingredients for the cake which she

<sup>17</sup> Shelagh Duckham Cox writes: "...there's a dispiriting feel to the end of this beautifully made book...Grit lies somewhere beneath the surface...But it's not realised." *Landfall* Spring 1996, p. 325.

eventually bakes and, when she is rescued from her "tower", the cake is ready to eat. On a metaphorical level, this tells us that she will have her cake and eat it too. Yet the cardboard construction has not been as successfully maintained in this novel, and this is why the ending is disappointing. The balance of realism and fantasy is tipped in favour of realism and does not allow for such fancy to end this tale.

Although only Margaret becomes a high-wire performer, the widow character as romantic heroine performs a variety of feats while the reader waits with bated breath for the climax which will bring her to her final ovation. The character is limited to some set moves, however, with little variation. There are certain standards of behaviour which are expected and reinforced by a moral code established by the narrative, notably by the polarisation of tastes and behaviours and character types. The predatory character becomes the clown in the pantomime, the fall guy who gets the pie in his face, and who is caricatured to such monstrous proportions that he never wins our sympathy, nor is he a real threat. Despite the comic terms in which she is often portrayed, the widow is not a character best suited to a freak show, but one a little past her prime, remade as romantic heroine, with a sense of other-worldliness. The result is a character with whom we are encouraged to sympathise and champion for the duration of the act, but who is not completely believable or seriously engaging beyond that limited sphere. It is Koea who is truly the wire walker, for in her characterisation the balancing act is most obvious, particularly in the polarisation of characters but also significantly in the sometimes uneasy balancing of seriousness and humour, realism and fantasy. The dangers are obvious and are realised at the times when the vindictiveness and self-congratulation overwhelm the comic content. We indulge her because of the wish fulfilment in the work, that those who have caused suffering will pay for it, and especially because the comedy has a grounding effect, reminding us that this is a world which is just real enough to engage us, but in which the unreality enables a sense of distance - for reader and writer alike.

## CHAPTER III

### LANGUAGE

Koea is a stylist<sup>1</sup> because her use of language is deliberate, careful and self-conscious to the point of being obvious, designed to create a two-dimensional, yet appealing, fictional world. Koea's language signals that the work is escapist. Its intensity, created by imagery, the idiosyncratic use of vocabulary and exaggeration, makes the work "showy", and the tone elevated to the point of pretentiousness, while, ironically, satire and irony attempt to undercut pretence. This contradiction gives the work an edge of cynicism, signalling that the narrative is self-consciously aware of its own fictionality. The dialogue is used for the purpose of delineating characters, often by contrast, and to typecast and parody them. The formality and decorum of the narrative builds up the seriousness of the character's plight while simultaneously undermining that seriousness. Koea's choice and deployment of words, as she works to establish the world of her romantic heroine, becomes at times so self-conscious as to intrude on the text.

That Koea constructs a middle class audience is evident in the idiom of the dialogue and narrative. The work is made most appealing to this audience by the fashionable *House and Garden* descriptions, and fine - and comic - turns of phrase. This is "comfort" reading, or escapism. The "comfortableness" is suggested by the decorous, rather old-fashioned tone, signalling that the story will never be allowed to become too frightening, but may impart some truth about aspects of the human condition. That it is escapist yet well-written enough to provide a sense of satisfaction for the reader is very much part of its appeal. Rosalind's neighbourhood may be "lawless", but from the start of *Staying Home and Being Rotten* it is clear from the language that this is a more appealing neighbourhood than the otherwise similar one in *Glory Days* by Rosie Scott where "the stretch of Mt Wellington highway...was whooping and howling like a machine" and the "lawn at the back was awash with slush and mud" (32). And Koea's romantic India in *Sing to Me, Dreamer*, in which Margaret lives idyllically in her pink palace and rose garden, is unlike that of Janette Turner Hospital's India in *The Ivory Swing* (1982) in which the romance of the stories of the gods Krishna and Radha is in contrast to reality, where women are old before their time, and the beautiful young widow Yashoda is stoned to death for her adoption of western ways.

There is an intensity to Koea's prose which gives it an elevated, even pretentious, tone of gentility which suits the portrayal of her heroines and the polarisation of characters. This intensity is created by the imagery, old fashioned or unusual

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Morrissey commented that Koea "is, arguably, the most elegant stylist now writing in New Zealand" (*Listener*, July 6, 1996, p. 43) and Kevin Ireland wrote "Koea is a superb stylist" (*Quote Unquote*, June 1996, p. 26).



vocabulary and exaggeration. These are used to elevate the heroine's concerns, so that when Bernadette observes that people are writing less in their letters to her: "The tracts of fresh and unused paper in these missives were like open casements through which icy air eddied" (34). This gives us the image from times gone by of a leaded window set high up in a deep stone wall, as in an Arthur Rackham, or pre-Raphaelite, illustration, and the exaggeration of "tracts" applied to spaces on a page, rather than its more usual application to areas of land, conveys the overwhelming emotions engendered by Bernadette's observations of the letters. Again, in order to impress upon us the seriousness of the heroine's predicament, Koea uses vocabulary in unusual structures and contexts, as Iain Sharp comments:

On a sentence-by-sentence level, *Staying Home and Being Rotten* is an eccentric success. Contravening many of the traditional dictates of fine writing, Koea nevertheless achieves a wonky, endearing kind of poetry. "Go in fear of abstractions," warns Ezra Pound, but Koea rushes in where *miglior fabbros* fear to tread, stringing abstract nouns together in the damndest fashion: *dialogue of tawdriness, hinterland of debasement, verisimilitude of affection*, and so on. She also has a peculiar way with verbs and adjectives. Consider the following: *The arrival of a parcel from James might once have provoked felicity. Now the gift of James's sudden attention brought merely the malady of silent and arcane lamentation.* I'm not at all sure that *provoked*, *malady* and *arcane* are correctly employed here, but the editorial decision to let them be was right, for these are the words which give the passage its idiosyncratic charm.<sup>2</sup>

The result is a gentle (with some exceptions), satirical, almost mock-heroic, tone so that the heroine is elevated and at the same time undermined.

In the serious stories, and sometimes in the novels, the effect of the excess and exaggeration encourages ridicule rather than sympathy. This occurs in the short story "Death and Transfiguration" where detail upon detail is added to the self-pitying tale of Amaryllis. The following extract could be the final straw, where the reader might lose all sympathy:

On that vile evening after the funeral I went halfway up the staircase and I lay down upon the snake of carpet that wound up to the top landing and I heard my own voice echoing in my ears like that of a wildcat or a panther stricken. I lay on those stairs and as evening fell I screamed from loneliness and despair, desolation and betrayal. I screamed in savage terror amidst the kithless emptiness of the house, knowing then, irrevocably, that I was so unloved, so unrequired by the world, that I would have to pay someone to keep me company. Down on the old farm, the night I heard them say I was just another mouth to feed, I knew I was a child who was, thus, a nuisance. I was not a listener to skylarks ever again. (*FRC*, 40)

<sup>2</sup> Iain Sharp "Minnie Mouse Plays Anna Karenina" *NZ Books*, Dec, 1992, p. 7.

The simile: "like that of a wildcat or a panther stricken" seems excessive and stretches credibility. Furthermore, the use of the word "kithless" and the phrase "down on the old farm" is uncomfortably reminiscent of Stella Gibbons' parody *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932). Whereas Jane Hurley, reviewing *Fifteen Rubies By Candlelight*, described Koea's stories as "careful echo soundings of the supposedly shallow waters of domesticity, to prove they conceal great ocean trenches of rage, pain and self-pity" and, for her, "astringent wit and ever-present irony keep all excesses firmly in check..."<sup>3</sup> excess is more evident than restraint, such as in the following example in which alliteration overpowers the description of Rosalind's opening of James's parcel:

It was like a surgical operation and must follow established procedure to avoid septicaemia of the spirit and haemorrhage of honour. (62)

It is in the humorous stories that Koea's particular use of imagery and exaggeration is more comfortable. Her playfulness with words<sup>4</sup> is used to provide entertaining descriptions in these stories, such as her characterisation of the fat, avaricious and lustful Bunt Hall in "The Widow". The story is infused with images of predation and gluttony, such as in the following extract:

He took the two hundred miles of hills between his town and hers with swooping aplomb, his big car flew along like a giant steel bird preparing for the mating season. In the spring, he thought, she would be ready to be taken, seared to a turn by thunder, lightning and fear of the dark. Difficulties over probate would roast her and she would be baked and grilled by Inland Revenue. Under the heat of fright and misery the widow would marinate nicely for the winter and then all joys would be his. (FRBC, 133)

Similarly, in "The Magic Way", the narrator's schemes to seduce Roberto are couched (so to speak) in images of his landscaped garden:

I see him, in my mind's eye, tanned and relaxed and wandering across the rump of my lawn, into the oak *allee*, out again and thence over the curved path to the terrace where my swing lounger, on chains, awaits. (FRBC, 19)

Sustained throughout the stories, this use of imagery serves to describe the character's

<sup>3</sup> Jane Hurley, "Hedonistic Pleasure", *Listener*, 21 August, 1993, p.44.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Leigh, commenting on Koea's *Staying Home and Being Rotten*, wrote: "Her enjoyment of the incongruous and quirky enabled her to play a little word game within the novel. She had been reading ...*After Many a Summer*, and listed unfamiliar words to look up in the dictionary. She then decided to work all these words into her own book. At the end she thought 'That's all the words done.' Then she found she still had three left. That is why the book now has a sentence which reads, 'In the insubstantial pageantry of venery her bewilderment was always, those days, like an edentate and prebyopic creature that had her by the throat.' Loose paraphrase: Bewilderment amidst so much pleasure-seeking, bit her like a toothless and short-sighted animal." "Personality plus", *NZ Herald*, 12 September, 1992, 2:6.

interior and exterior preoccupations simultaneously.

While it reaches the point of burlesque in the examples above, it is the element of satire in Koea's work which controls some of the excesses in the writing. This effect is evident in the short story "Edward and Lally/Ted and Pam" (*FRBC*), which satirises the "new speak" of New Age philosophies, personal and corporate image-building and advertising. Lally (who has changed her name from the unfashionable "Pam") has a speech therapist appropriately named "Mrs Van Utteridge", from whose hands "All age spots had been removed by an avant-garde method which caused no scarring and resulted in the holistic completion of psyche and epidermis" (55). Edward (previously "Ted") is enrolled "at the best gym in town, recommended authoritatively by Crossan, who was the big man in face lifts and specialised in the removal of dewlaps above and below corporate, and other, chins" and wears a shirt of "a *nouvelle* designer label from a landlocked principality within sight of the majestic Pyrenees where the population was reputed to be of extreme beauty and slimness into advanced old age" (54).

The satire also contributes to the stylistic and thematic success of this story, through the ironic descriptions of the interior decor and the characters' cosmetic surgery. Thus, "The decorator had given the mirror an inlaid imitation marble backing in forest colours to give all reflections profundity" (52), and "...the stained glass artist, had assembled all the glass in the red/blue colour spectrum to promote healing and homeopathic goodwill..." (60). Similarly, there is an ironic statement about the superficiality of the characters, and a touch of the macabre, in the narrative's calm contemplation of the effort and agony Edward and Lally are prepared to endure in order to acquire the right image, which encompasses extensive plastic surgery:

Lally put one hot hand on the ivory splendour of her left cheek. The tucks taken beyond her hairline to lift the forehead, the reshaping of her eyelids, the implants in her (now) pouty lips, were all useless...Her navel had not yet been lifted and placed slightly off-centre as a statement of life's enigmas and also, after their classes in caring about the universe, a mute protest about the destruction of the South American rain forests. (60)

The interest in the characters' use of vocabulary suggests to Jane Hurley, that Koea is "satirising her own habit of using the occasional impossible word..."<sup>5</sup> So that Lally, examining her teeth in the mirror, concludes:

"'They're too big...I see that as the salient problem.' They had been, she and Edward, to classes in vocabulary management and tried to utilise unusual words in a natural way to create a greater atmosphere of personal productivity in the vocalisation sphere." (51)

The mostly silent and "invisible" (52) Grahame (Maida's husband) offers the only

---

<sup>5</sup>Jane Hurley, "Hedonistic Pleasures", *Listener*, August 21, 1993, p. 44.

sensible words in the conversation which runs through the story. He becomes a measuring stick of normality as the satirising of the self-deception of the characters builds. Edward, having talked about the work he has done at the gym on his trapezius and latissimus dorsi, remarks: "I'm concentrating now on the gluteus maximus...To put it in layman's terms...the bum." Grahame responds: "The bum indeed. Laymen indeed." (54) Lally and Grahame become allied as Grahame defends her against Maida's tactlessness. He uses sarcasm and imitates the others' language of self-improvement:

'I feel sure those very kind words - those kind and well-intentioned words - from our own very lovely Maida, our sociable Maida of whom everyone speaks well including the man at the service station and a few thousand others as well, I feel sure Lally's going to be effectively enlarged psychologically by such graciousness.' (57)

The narrative details Lally's realisation of the futility of the re-building of her body and mind. The last paragraph begins: "As the taxi drove away she could see Maida regarding its ceiling with the daintily lascivious and proprietorial look of a bride rampant" (60-61). Thus, despite all her efforts, she can still be defeated by a rival for her husband's attentions. Koea's satire shows that Lally's pursuit of superficial perfection is ultimately self-defeating.

Koea's use of dialogue, like her use of satire (and, often, in combination with it), anchors the sometimes fanciful flights of narration, and serves to delineate characters, particularly by the use of idiomatic expressions which seem to capture the essence of character, or make a point, perhaps by way of contrast. In "Edward and Lally/Ted and Pam" (*FRBC*) Lally's learned, self-conscious, emotionless elocution, established earlier in the story, contrasts with the warmth of her mother's colloquial expression, when Lally constructs in her mind a phone call from her mother (from which her own voice is, ironically, absent).

*Is that you, Pammy? Her mother's voice would echo over the line....You don't sound like yourself at all, dearie. That's what she had said last week. Been to the dentist? Have you had an injection? Capped? Had your teeth capped? What did you do that for, lovey? Pammy? Are you there? (58)*

The sense of the older woman's distance from her daughter is shown by the first question to which there seems to be no response and the short sentences which suggest disbelief that her daughter would need to have her teeth capped. Her concern and love for her daughter as she is, or rather was, before all the "improvements" is also evident in the sympathetic and regretful tone of "*What did you do that for, lovey?*". The passage highlights Lally's insecurities and doubts about herself, and ironically indicates that she has her own measuring stick of normality in her unconscious, since this is a conversation constructed in her head.

*Pam? Are you there, dear?* her mother always said on the telephone.

And only then comes Lally's sole contribution to the imaginary conversation:

*I don't know, Mum. I don't know who I am.* (58)

In "Naughty Maureen" (*FRBC*) the character of the bully is established by his first words:

'What the hell do you think you're playing at?' His hand, as harsh as his voice, grasped her arm without affection as she stepped from the taxi. (97)

Dialogue is used in this story for the purpose of ironic contrast with the narrative passages, as in the following example, in which the bully continues his diatribe, and ends with his companion's recollections of lunch with the bully's former lover earlier in the day.

'And you're not even mechanically minded,' he said as he punched buttons, 'You don't even know how to work the lift.'  
'That's because -'  
'Shut up. Just shut up.'  
Before the lift doors had finally closed there was a sudden startling view of Robben Island far out in the bay. It glimmered in a steely sea, grim as a reproach, ephemeral as forgotten virtue under a rising moon.  
'Do you see that out there?' Naughty Maureen, lunching vigorously earlier in the day, gestured with a creamy spoon halfway through her second helping of lemon tart. 'We kept Nelson Mandela out there and a lot of the other troublemakers.'  
She dug into the pie again. 'I'd have left them there to rot, hey?' There it was again, the guttural Afrikaans plaint calling for agreement or emphasis. She was not sure which. (98)

That the man "punches" the buttons, orders the woman to "shut up" (repeated for emphasis) alerts the reader to his violent, bullying tendencies and desire for control (presumably, had she been allowed to complete her sentence, she would have said "That's because you never let me operate it"). Furthermore, the view of Robben Island casts over their relationship a sinister shadow with its suggestion that tyranny, hatred, self-aggrandisement and greed on a national scale give licence to the same on a personal scale, or vice versa, although the juxtaposition of the two, as if to heighten the woman's plight to the scale of tragedy, is not convincing. However, the narrative persists, and tyranny, represented by the harsh vocabulary of the rather clichéd descriptions: "steely sea" and "grim as a reproach", is contrasted with personal freedom expressed in the fluent and vague simile: "ephemeral as a forgotten virtue under a rising moon", as if to align the woman's situation with that of Nelson Mandela. Similarly, connotations attach meaning in the narrative pieces between parts of Maureen's conversation. Like other Koea caricatures which align personal greed with gluttony, Maureen is *lunching vigorously*. She is waving a *creamy spoon* indicating a life of luxury and privilege and is on her

*second helping of lemon tart*, suggesting a bitter-sweet victory in the establishment of a political system which exists for the privilege of a fortunate minority and, undoubtedly, making a comment on Maureen's proclivities as well. Later, dialogue between the man and woman, with little narrative intervention, tells us more by the use of irony, as in this example in which Maureen is the subject of the conversation:

'She used to have the most marvellous ideas.' He was staring into the middle distance. 'She had very definite opinions. Very informed sort of woman. Knew all about everything.' 'Yes,' she said. 'I got that idea too.' (100)

We know that the woman's reply is ironic from what we have learned about Maureen earlier in the story. The woman is not, as the man supposes, agreeing with him at all. This enables her to score a silent victory against him, particularly since his belief in her agreement facilitates the entertaining conclusion to the story.

Dialogue is used to set characters in opposition to one another. In "Mrs Pratt Goes to China" (*The Woman Who Never Went Home*) there is a brief scene-setting piece of narrative, which reveals a great deal about "them" simply because that is how they are referred to, putting them in opposition to the main character:

After Arnold's funeral some of them came back to the house to say their piece or have their say, depending on which was longer. (1)

Subsequently, the dialogue, using idiom and mimicry, is allowed to speak for itself:

I saw Arnie last Tuesday. No, I tell a lie. Wednesday it must of been because Wednesday was the day Mavis said to me, she said, 'Ron, that car's making a funny noise, a sort of pop in the motor, Ron,' she said, and on the way to the garage I stopped at Vi's and who should I see there but Arn. 'Arn's not looking well,' I said. And that was the last time I saw poor old Arn alive. (1)

Mrs Pratt's dislike of her relatives by marriage, is indicated by her contrastingly succinct and correct use of language:

I am going to say goodbye to you all now permanently. Now that Arnold is no longer here my link with you is severed. (5)

The relatives try to patch it up, insisting lamely and unconvincingly:

We've really got to be quite fond of you, sort of...In your own way, over the years. You're quite a dag that way you've got of talking. (5-6)

The precise, if somewhat caricatured, rendition of idiomatic expression makes a point about unsatisfactory human relationships in which the oblique use of language barely

disguises dislike behind its clichés and pointed comments on the part of both Mrs Pratt and Arnold's relatives. Psycho-babble and political correctness are, in a similar manner, satirised in *Staying Home and Being Rotten*. Rosalind uses Dinah's own language back at her as Dinah, Rosalind's psychiatrist friend, tries to convince Rosalind she can do anything:

'...a linesman or a chauffeur or anything, and that is why I've taken on a man to be my receptionist so my patients can see, the moment they step in the door, that stereotypes are outlawed within the framework of a proper and modern society. And Henry's empathy with them is instant, Rosalind. Instant. Henry feels their pain, Rosalind. He knows their pain because their pain is his pain.'  
'And how do you feel about that?'  
'How do you mean, how do I feel about that?' (171)

Thus, the mimicry of the dialogue makes fun of political correctness and, presumably, its hypocrisy, since Dinah will not tolerate having the language she uses with her clients applied to herself.

The employment of what could be called "decorum" to contrast "good" and "bad" ways of behaving is evident from the first collection of short stories. In the lives of certain protagonists, decorum is observed particularly as an assertion of their self-worth, and because of its ability to lend dignity to their behaviour in beleaguered circumstances. Hence, Mrs Pratt uses it to defy her dead husband's invasive family. It is related to the protagonists' middle-class status and, for the reader, it becomes a measure of their worth against that of the less well-behaved characters. In "Oh Bunny", Louisa, has risen above her humble origins, and the narrative uses "decorum" as a statement of Louisa's self-worth compared to the grasping intentions of her relatives. Her mother and sister have tracked her down, and Louisa hides inside the house pretending that no-one is home. She overhears their conversation as they inspect her garden in a proprietorial manner, declaring:

"More white flowers. White flowers make me sick. I'd have all that white muck out. I'd have something worth looking at." (73)

This is followed by a rather sentimental narrative comment which polarises the two positions by a contrasting use of language:

Those burgeoning white daisies gave an abundant shelter to baby birds after flying lessons but today the trusses of flowers sank down to the lawn as if exhausted. (73)

The extent to which a kind of behaviour "above her station" has been a defence for Louisa as a child is revealed by her mother's overheard comment:

"Louisa," said her mother from the front door, "was the

biggest little sod of a kid in the creation of cats.  
 You could thrash her and thrash her and she just looked  
 at you as if you stank..." (76)

The language of these characters gives their portrayal a nightmarish quality. Like those discussed in the previous chapter, the resulting characterisations are stereotyped and melodramatic, and have a vindictive quality. The reader thus, has a picture of fat, greedy, tasteless, spiteful and grasping slobs. This portrayal is made more obvious by the contrastingly "cultured" tone of the narrative. There is a fairytale quality once again; echoes of the story of the wicked stepmother with the poisoned apple tracking down Snow White.

It was the handwriting that made her scream, her mother's  
 malevolent and impenitent handwriting, that crushed crabbed  
 script that scratched its way across the paper like old  
 alchemy for poison. (71)

The language seems exaggerated, but is powerful all the same, conjuring up a picture of a witch-like figure of sinister proportions. The reader is thus encouraged into sympathy with Louisa, as with Snow White, by the distinction between good and evil and between the possession of decorum and the lack of it.

That most of the narrative in Koea's work is more formal than idiomatic demonstrates sympathy with the heroine whose behaviour and speech are echoes of the narrative style, which also reflects traits of character and social status. Many of Koea's main characters are in beleaguered circumstances and use decorum as a defence, as Mrs Pratt does with her correct and formal use of language. She does not abbreviate "I am" to "I'm" but speaks clearly and precisely and, one deduces, firmly, using formal vocabulary: "permanently" rather than "forever", and "my link with you is severed" ends her speech definitely and conclusively; the line has been drawn in no uncertain terms. The decorum, then, appears in the speech of the major characters. It also appears in the narrative itself, characterised by a somewhat "delicate" tone and a precise use of vocabulary, through which the reader can imagine the narrator speaking in rather "plummy" tones, like a kind of verbal one-upmanship by which one asserts superiority. It is used in *Staying Home and Being Rotten* to elucidate the personalities and also the social standing of Rosalind and Dinah.

Rosalind and Dinah went to school together when they were five, and their chatter had altered only imperceptibly since then, mostly with regard to the size of things. In primer one they talked of dolls, boys and sixpences. Now they talked of people, men and investments.

Both owned property, tried to run immaculate cheque accounts, were treated with respect in the better department stores and cooked very well. Their repertoire of dishes was small, but splendidly presented. Dinah's cuisine ran more towards pasta and she also had a penchant for Middle Eastern cookery. Rosalind served meat cooked



in a variety of wines, often Bulgarian, and she specialised in stalwart pies of the Victorian era. (2)

In this piece, the sentences achieve a fluent rhythm, and there is balance in the use of groupings of three in the last two sentences of the first paragraph, which give a tone of assurance and of formality. The sense of "decorum" is evident with the use of formal vocabulary such as "imperceptibly", "immaculate", "repertoire" and "cuisine", combined with a decorous tone partly indicated by what we can deduce about the social standing of the two characters by words such as "investments", "cheque accounts" and "better department stores". Such words give an indication of the characters' access to wealth, and also suggest the kind of rigour with which they conduct their lives. This is verified by the use of such words as "respect", "stalwart" and even "the Victorian era" all of which hint at old-fashioned values. This has the dual, and somewhat ambivalent effect of both satirising and encouraging sympathy, or identification, with the characters.

The use of "decorum", therefore, is very closely related to the characterisations in Koea's work. Her heroines have a code of decorum which they use as a last defence against the ravages of the world, and those ranged against them exhibit a decided lack of decorum. It is, uncomfortably at times, humorously at others, a stereotypical view of what constitutes "goodies" and "baddies" (as discussed in chapter two). It lends to the work an element of pantomime with its heroes and heroines pitting their wits against the cads and bounders. The heroines in Koea's novels practise "decorum" in similar ways and because of similar circumstances. All have come from sheltered, protected situations to face the hard truth that not everyone behaves decently and, faced with such adversity, they all retreat into their learned responses of seemly, socially conventional, polite behaviour. This politeness, this observance of good manners at all costs, this "decorum", is what Koea calls the last resort of the beleaguered when bigger remedies fail.<sup>6</sup> What this "decorum" succeeds in doing is to elevate the heroine to a higher plane, principally by showing up the antagonists with their shoddy behaviour by way of contrast. Good manners seldom fail to impress, and are traditional attributes of the heroic behaviour. They are like everyone's version of the ancient code of conduct of the knight-errant. Mrs Pratt's employment of very formal language is a measure of her observance of decorum in contrast to its absence in the language of "them". Rosalind uses it, out of fear, to avoid the attentions of the violent James to whose behaviour hers is diametrically opposed.

The obvious danger in the use of this code of "decorum" is the assumption that the quality of a person's character is reflected in the way they speak. There is also a strong "us" and "them" polarisation suggested by such a distinction, which is limiting to a full consideration of human nature. Thus, the code does not always convince. It has overtones of maintaining a stiff upper lip in the British fashion, under the crystal chandeliers, while the doodle bugs fly overhead. (Those of bad taste would have

---

<sup>6</sup>Koea expressed these sentiments in a conversation when the decorum of her work was being discussed. They also appear in various forms in Tim Wilson's interview with Koea, *Quote Unquote*, July 1993, pp.18 and 19.

scuttled, in cowardly fashion, down to the air-raid shelter.) It has class connotations of decorum maintained at all costs in the face of impropriety. However, the stark polarisation of characters existing in a "cardboard" world created for the entertainment of the reader is all that seems required of the language, and to this extent it is successful.

The use of "decorum", largely indicated by the speech of the heroine and echoed in the language of the narrative, is integral to the thematic structure of each work, and its purpose of entertaining the reader. Thematically, it supports the heroine by showing how social mores discriminate against her and how goodness can defeat "evil", despite whatever ironies this struggle reveals. The comic polarisation of character and the demonstration of a just outcome achieved by good behaviour overcoming bad, provides the entertainment. This is shown particularly well in *Staying Home and Being Rotten*. Whereas the more sanguine of us would have told the thoroughly nasty James to "Piss off" Rosalind simply says "I don't want to see you, James" (59). Rosalind curses herself for her "*politesse*" (and so Koea laughs at it too) seeing it as a kind of deformity, like a "withered foot or an ear not exactly formed" (59), yet it is the only defence she has left. She has left James in London and retreated to the supposed safety and obscurity of a New Zealand suburb. Yet, like Louisa's grasping relatives in "Oh Bunny", he has tracked her down. Rosalind keeps her dignity by maintaining a sense of decorum. The ability to both assert herself and draw barriers about herself is what she must achieve, with as little deviation as possible from social mores which, nevertheless, gain a new perspective for Rosalind as she weighs up her prospects for survival. As in *The Grandiflora Tree* certain social mores are shown to be discriminatory to women on their own. The reader is beguiled into sympathy with the protagonist because of her decorum and despite her flaws. Iain Sharp comments of Rosalind: "One could say that she becomes a whore and a swindler, but that seems far too harsh a judgement on such a likeable character. Besides, the rottenness which surrounds her far exceeds her own".<sup>7</sup> Of course, Rosalind is never described in such terms in the narrative. The point is, irony or not, that she has won out by good behaviour, not by bad.

Rosalind's brand of "decorum", therefore, is laced with irony, depending more on keeping up outward appearances than on being completely "good". Decorum has a darker side too, for it hides dreadful truths. For Rosalind it hides the truth of her situation, and decorum (like the possession of good taste, discussed in chapter two) can be used like a camouflage by others trying to gain advantage. Thus, James addresses his card "The Lady Rosalind" and Rosalind reflects: "All pleasantries seemed to hide abominations of some kind" (64). Decorum, for Rosalind, involves not losing her temper and swearing, maintaining her dignity at all costs by hiding her fear, and knowing when to tactically withdraw. She also keeps her own counsel and is the soul of discretion. Thus, there is a setting up of types and outcomes which is typical of novels of manners and, once again, language becomes the means of making the contrasts, this time between the behaviour of Rosalind and the behaviour of the other women who are victims of the predatory James. The other women resort variously to hysterics, setting lawyer

---

<sup>7</sup> Iain Sharp, "Minnie Mouse plays Anna Karenina", *NZ Books*, Dec. 1992, p.7.

brothers-in-law onto James (even they can only shout empty threats over the phone) or to stoically putting up with him. Rosalind is the survivor who retreats, decorously and discretely, and begins to put her life back together on her own terms. She claims that she has become as bad as everyone else, but we are not convinced. As Iain Sharp has commented she is too "likeable", too well behaved. When Rosalind contemplates departing from decorous behaviour by demanding payment from Ben in exchange for sex, she uses euphemism to assuage her conscience:

*The laws on prostitution are not to be changed*, says a story at the bottom of page three. This also emanates from the capital, another blast. *It is still against the law to solicit for business in public places and to run a brothel using the endeavours of employees to provide an income for the keeper.* But, Rosalind thinks, she is not doing this. She is merely getting to know her old friend Benjamin better, and he is helping her with her groceries and a few other things. (151)

Those "few other things" include all her other bills and the items of luxury which she had previously been accustomed to enjoy as a matter of course. The irony that euphemism, in itself a decorous way of avoiding harsh realities, becomes a means of self-deception, is a source of humour for the reader.

Decorum and discretion seem outdated attributes for a survivor and more like the restrictive attributes of a victim, when assertiveness and even aggression are more favoured in modern fiction, yet so compelling is this notion made by the narrative that we can almost overlook its implausibility. Decorum is used like a spell to take away shame and dishonour. By means of the decorous tone of the narrative, the scene is set for the problem of James and his package. Rosalind leaves it in the letter box for a few days, hoping it will be stolen, having heard that thefts from letter boxes are common at Christmas. Finally, she brings it into the house, holding it at arm's length with a pair of tongs. Her other hand is fortified with a "glass of pale dry sherry...so old and notable that it nearly trembled in its bottle" (4). Before performing this act, Rosalind has bathed and changed because: "A curious idea had come into her head that if she dressed for the part and behaved with inexorable grace it would all turn into a piece of theatre and would, thus, be untrue" (5). This handling with tongs, the fortification with fine wine, dressing for the occasion and the tactical withdrawal to the calm of her house and garden - "an affectionate landscape" (66) - are part of the "decorum" Rosalind employs to keep James at bay. There is no affection in James's demesne, no flowers, only mould which grew under the sink. The garden gives Rosalind peace, grace and beauty, a decorous environment with a healing influence, cleansing her of disgrace and shame. Rosalind has seen an old woman who "existed honourably and with grace" in her garden at Plettenberg Bay at a time when she has just discovered James's true character, and she swims in the sea, wishing it would "wash away her thoughts, which were graceless and shaming, and it might replace them with the example of the lady with her plants..." (102). Of course, Rosalind only supposes that the old woman "exists honourably", but the performance of the outward display of decorum is ritual enough to cast the spell.

Koea's use of language is complex. Its exaggeration, old-fashioned decorous tone, caricature, extended (and occasionally mixed) metaphors, and the eccentric use of vocabulary and phraseology threaten to unbalance the work at times, so that ridicule is a more likely response than sympathy for the heroine. At other times it is admirable for its skill, or perhaps more accurately, its "idiosyncratic charm", to use Iain Sharp's words. Koea's "magic" with words amounts to a kind of sorcery by which we may be, like critic Jane Hurley, bewitched.<sup>8</sup> The elements in the cauldron include imagery, satire, mimicry, decorum, irony, and so on. There is also, in most of the work, a sense that the writer is largely in control; a stylist knowingly using all these elements with some skill, even laughing at herself along the way for her use of vocabulary and the decorous tone of her narrative.

The danger of Koea's particular kind of style is that its diverse elements must be carefully balanced against one another, and this fails at times, for example in the establishment of an air of pretentiousness by means of the code of "decorum", in the vindictive mimicry of some of the dialogue, and where the language seems overwritten and even precious. Peter Wells describes the language as "slightly Anglican around the edges".<sup>9</sup> It often seems anachronistic, with a bitter-sweet effect which can become sickly sweet. Lindsay Botham, reviewing *Fifteen Rubies*, wrote: "These stories are enormously good value for money. Every one is crammed full of devices, details, asides, similes, metaphors and so much rich, tasty imagery that it is like tripping into a vat of sweet viscosity, the particles of which cling like sticky Lilliputians to your senses",<sup>10</sup> echoing Kevin Ireland's view that Koea's world is one of "miniature and make-believe".<sup>11</sup> Where the balance between fantasy and realism and between seriousness and humour is maintained, this "excess" of the language works to some degree, while at other times where the balance is not maintained, it works against plausibility and credibility. Yet, for the most part, the reader becomes happy to be cast under the spell Koea weaves with her words. Where the use of language becomes so obvious as to intrude onto the text, it can often be indulged as appropriate to the creation of an artificial world. Koea is a storyteller before all else, and she knows the tools of her trade. In this respect, it need not be too great a disappointment that her use of language serves only to create a polarised, two-dimensional world which promotes the heroine and the often contradictory values pertaining to her, rather than a real view of the world.

---

<sup>8</sup> Jane Hurley, "I was completely bewitched", *Listener*, 22 August 1992, p.48.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Wells, "You must read this", *NZ Books*, Dec. 1992, p.3.

<sup>10</sup> Lindsay Botham, "Little gems shine in Rubies", *The Dominion*, 21 August, 1993, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Ireland, "Staying home and being normal", *Quote Unquote*, Nov. 1994, p. 24.

## CHAPTER IV

### NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

From the evidence so far it may seem that Koea's work could be dismissed as eccentric in language, romantic and sentimental in content and simplistic in characterisation. Looking at the elements of her work in isolation can artificially highlight the "ridiculous", whilst ignoring the cohesion which the narrative achieves. We have already seen how humour is used to lift the characterisation of the work beyond self-congratulation and vindictiveness, and beyond mere romance, partly by reminding us that what Koea is writing about is an unreal world. Koea also attempts to lift the work by drawing the diverse elements together into a cohesive narrative. Koea's detached narrative voice, her use of humour and her quirky use of language alerts the reader that this is storytelling mode, in that it creates distance from the reality of the story while it simultaneously entertains and, as in a theatre, we are prepared to suspend disbelief. Furthermore, we recognise a stock situation in which the romantic heroine suffers trials but is rescued at the end. Despite the autobiographical links outlined in chapter two, Koea's work is, therefore, like the life of the child Daisy Goodwill in *The Stone Diaries*, "a primary act of imagination"<sup>1</sup> in which Koea takes real life and, like Daisy, engages upon "supplementing, modifying, summoning up the necessary connections, conjuring the pastoral or heroic or whatever, even dreaming a ... tower into existence, ... exaggerating or lying outright, inventing letters or conversations of impossible gentility, or casting conjecture in a pretty light."<sup>2</sup> It is this act of imagination, transforming the mundane or chaotic into the controlled order of a story cast "in a pretty light", which is Koea's primary strength since it succeeds in constructing the two-dimensional world with which she is concerned in all of her novels. Yet that Koea is concerned with more than just telling a story is evident when the third, or missing, dimension intrudes. The contradiction in the critical response which sees her work as, at one end of the spectrum, contrived, and at the other having a firm grasp on reality, is echoed in her texts. It seems clear at times that we are not to take the work seriously and at others that the opposite is implied.

The contradictions could be illustrated by placing the critical response to Koea's work along a continuum. Jane Stafford could be placed in the middle, with her view that Koea's plot (in *Sing to Me, Dreamer*) is "deliberately cardboard",<sup>3</sup> while

---

<sup>1</sup> Daisy, confined for weeks to a darkened room by illness "understood that if she was going to hold on to her life at all, she would have to rescue it by a primary act of imagination..."  
Carol Shields *The Stone Diaries* London, Fourth Estate, 1993, pp 76-77.

<sup>2</sup> Shields, loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Stafford, *Landfall*, Autumn 1995, p. 162.

Norman Bilborough and Ian Gordon could be placed at opposite ends of the scale: Bilborough with his view that Koea's work is "unreal" and "contrived"<sup>4</sup> and Gordon with his opinion that Koea's work has a "firm grip on human reality".<sup>5</sup> There is plenty of evidence to support the "deliberately cardboard" view at the middle of the continuum. The term "cardboard" in this context is taken to mean two-dimensional, that is, like a cardboard cut-out which represents reality on the face of it, but has no depth, or a missing dimension, so that it becomes perhaps a melodramatic, or cartoon-like, or otherwise simplistic, representation of reality. The words "whimsical", "playful" and "burlesque" used by Stafford to describe *Sing to Me, Dreamer* are indicators of a self-conscious narrative voice, and that the unreality is indeed "deliberate". Thus, Koea constructs a story of stock situations and stock characters, polarises the narrative with chaos on one side and order on the other, allows the happy ending to dictate the course of the plot and adds a sense of theatre to invite a willing suspension of disbelief. This novel is the most successful at creating a cardboard reality because the balance between fantasy and realism is better sustained in this work than in the others. There are also points of identification for the reader so that by recognition of characters and situations, with which we may identify or sympathise, we are able to champion the heroine and the values she represents. This is probably what Ian Gordon, reviewing the same book, meant when he claimed it has a "firm grip on reality" and, presumably, in order to create such a "cardboard" representation of reality there must be an understanding of reality as it exists beyond the bounds of the book and against which the content of the book works. That the work is a "cardboard" reality implies contrivance and unreality, which Bilborough observed, reviewing *Fifteen Rubies By Candlelight*. It was the unevenness of its application in this collection of short stories, resulting in the clash of two "realities" which most likely prompted his response. So there is validity in all points along the continuum, and when all the work of Koea is examined as a whole there is a clearer picture of the contradictions and their complexity to explain why the work can be "exact and satisfying"<sup>6</sup> as Stafford claimed for *Sing to Me*, and why, at other times, Koea, metaphorically described as a "wire-walker" by Bilborough, "falls abysmally into the net".<sup>7</sup>

The meaning of the word "story" itself could be placed along a continuum ranging from fabrication to truth, and even then the continuum can describe a circle rather than a straight line as the two ends of the scale overlap. This is because the story is a

---

<sup>4</sup> Norman Bilborough, *Landfall*, Spring 1993, p. 329.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Gordon, "Trick lies in the but", *NZ Herald*, 15 Oct. 1994, 3:7.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Stafford, *op. cit.*, p. 163

<sup>7</sup> Norman Bilborough, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

phenomenon of human behaviour which serves many purposes.<sup>8</sup> The kind of story Koea writes (with some exceptions which will be discussed shortly) plays on the "psychological need"<sup>9</sup> of the reader that justice prevail. So that, just as Koea's characters are polarised into heroines and villains, her narrative is polarised. Order, fairytale and justice are placed in opposition to chaos, reality and evil: In reality there is chaos, in the fairytale order is possible, goodness will achieve justice and evil will be punished. Koea commented: "Life is quite out of control for us all, but I have to have the illusion of order."<sup>10</sup> This is commonly the function of the story, to impose order on the chaos, from the formulaic "Once upon a time..." story which ends "and they lived happily ever after". Such storytelling asserts the correct place of justice and affirms that goodness will be recognised and will defeat evil, and if we hear this repeated often enough, perhaps it will become true. So the continuum becomes a circle in wish fulfilment stories.

Many of Koea's stories are infused with the optimism of a happy ending, even to the point of stretching credibility as in Margaret's joining the circus in *Sing To Me* and Elaine's fairy-tale rescue in *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista*. That her heroines deserve a happy ending is clear in the telling. Yet the reader is justified in feeling uneasy about Koea's endings. In Elaine's story, it seems that nothing must stand in the way of a happy conclusion for the heroine which is in stark contrast to the brutal punishment which must be dealt to the burglars for their story to have closure. What seems to occur in the writing is a clash between fantasy and realism. Elaine's story has grim beginnings, but she is transformed into romantic heroine, while the burglars' story represents a reality which moves beyond the confines of the book. These two contrasting representations of truth in fiction are what psychiatrist Anthony Storr describes as "abreaction" and "integration":

An Ian Fleming or a romantic lady novelist are indeed using phantasy to enable us to escape from reality, and we need not necessarily despise their efforts at providing us with what may be a useful safety-valve. In so far as such literary efforts serve a 'therapeutic' or healing function, they may be compared to abreaction: the provision of an opportunity to 'blow off steam'; to rid the psyche of impulses which cannot find expression in ordinary life, as well as compensating for the disappointments of reality. But the great novelists are not concerned with escape. George Eliot, Tolstoy, and Proust, to

---

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Paul E. Jose and William F. Brewer, "Character Identification, Suspense, and Outcome Resolution", *Developmental Psychology*, pp. 911-924, which discusses the importance for children of a "just world" representation of reality in fiction. That is, the characters with which the readers readily identify must have just resolutions to their stories, indicating that they (both characters and readers) inhabit a world in which order and justice is possible, if not inherent.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Else, author of *The Warrior Queen* (1995) said in an interview: "I believe the first function of fiction is to tell a story, to recognise that there is some deep psychological need in humans to hear a story" seeming to suggest that the setting out and the resolution of a story fulfils a need to hear an ordered representation of life. Laura Kroetsch, "Telling Stories", *Listener*, 9 Sept., 1995, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Jack Leigh, "Personality Plus", *NZ Herald*, 12 Sept., 1992, 2:6.

take but three examples, are concerned to depict life as it is lived, and to make sense out of it. Their imaginations are used, as Freud's was, to penetrate below surface appearances to reach a deeper and richer truth. Their novels are an attempt to make some kind of coherent integral whole out of their own experience and view of life; and, by virtue of their perceptions, our own lives are enriched.<sup>11</sup>

The attempt to move from what Anthony Storr calls "abreaction" to "integration" and back again highlights the difficulties in *The Wedding*. The story of the burglars is at odds with the denial of reality Koea customarily employs in her novels. While this particular novel draws attention to the unreality of Elaine's story by the use of realism in the subplot of the burglars, none of Koea's happy endings satisfy beyond the limited fictional world which she creates. The strong sense that the world her heroines inhabit is a "cardboard construction" prevents extended contemplation of the closure of their stories which are just as contrived. As Australian writer Marion Halligan said:

The fascinating thing about fairy stories is that they stop before anything becomes difficult. And this is really where they should begin...Real relationships are patched, often thin and very shabby, but they are to be valued. The given is terrifically flawed people, not these perfect people of fairy tales.<sup>12</sup>

Koea has made a deliberate choice in the construction of her novels, leading to a happy ending for the heroine, since a number of her short stories show she is capable of a far more gritty realism (For example, "A Rustle in the Undergrowth", "The Dragon Courier", "Meat" (*WWNWH*), and "The Face of the Land", "Your Father, the Bird", "A Different View", "Good Order and Naval Discipline" (*FRBC*)). In the first collection of short stories "Mrs Pratt Goes to China" and "A Rustle in the Undergrowth" illustrate the endings Koea has used: the triumphant, happy ending, and the grim and inconclusive ending in which the protagonist's predicament is revealed but not resolved. In "Mrs Pratt Goes to China" Mrs Pratt (who is never otherwise named) triumphs over her late husband's overbearing relatives by severing her links with them, building a high fence to keep out unwanted visitors, and changing her reading habits.

A voracious reader, she gave up her usual diet of novels which for the most part dealt with the implications of life and death, public and private responsibility in satirical but wickedly funny vein. She waded through murder mysteries at the rate of two a day because they presented death, waste, spite, destruction and misery in cheerful guise within bright covers and they warmed her. (7)

Finally, she departs with "radiant joy" on a trip to China. The story finishes:

---

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation*, Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1976, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> Marion Halligan, interviewed by Helen Elliot, "Discontents of the Rich", *Listener*, 16 Sept., 1995, p. 50.



It seemed that her whole life, which had been made up of chaos with flashes of joy, was now being weighed down on the side of joy. (10)

In the second story, "A Rustle in the Undergrowth", the painful experience of abandonment and isolation is outlined in the situation of a mixed marriage when the husband rediscovers his cultural roots and responsibilities for his whanau, leaving his pakeha wife who has long since severed her links with her own family due to its refusal to accept her marriage. The protagonist's shock and sense of betrayal is poignantly shown in the final paragraph:

She put the receiver down...but the laughter seemed to follow her down the hall, blotting out all the years of silk patch-work draperies, scented candles and private schools for the boys as effectively as a raucous joke will end a quiet dinner. In the gilded mirror beside the front door she saw her own reflection lined about the eyes and mouth, recognised the person she did not know who was so suddenly and unaccountably afraid. (18)

Koea's choice of the happy ending for her novels indicates that she is setting out to create happier possibilities for her heroine than realism permits. The widow character becomes a romantic heroine and the fairytale, happy-ending plot allows Koea to use humour which appears in none of her grittier stories. The longer works (the novels) lend themselves to a more extended working out of the predicaments, and if they are to result in a happy ending then a light touch and humour are useful in showing that chaos can be defeated, all the more so if order is an "illusion".

Endings for women writers have always been problematic. A critic who reviewed Koea's first collection of short stories, wrote:

Just occasionally...one wants to ask whether women shedding the stereotypes and setting out joyfully for French Polynesia, India or somewhere in the east is not becoming every bit as platitudinous a conclusion as those which ended the romantic stories of the nineteenth century. A sort of feminist equivalent of riding into the sunset? One would like to know how Mrs Pratt found China or whether Elspeth will ever get there. The responsibility is not wholly Koea's of course, but on reviewing short stories which span some 130 years of women's writing in this country one is entitled to ask if anything has changed, or are women writers still unable to make an end?<sup>13</sup>

A romantic ending would appear to cancel out any attempts at showing the character has been embarked upon a successful quest for self. Rachel Blau du Plessis wrote

---

<sup>13</sup> Jan Pilditch, review of *The Woman Who Never Went Home, Landfall*, March 1989, pp.106-107.

optimistically that:

It is the project of twentieth century women writers to solve the contradiction between love and quest and to replace the alternate endings in marriage and death that are their cultural legacy from nineteenth century life and letters by offering a different set of choices.<sup>14</sup>

Koea has not solved this contradiction, in fact there is little indication that she is aware of any such contradiction or of any "different set of choices", except that her contrived endings may constitute an admission that the choices are limited. Rosalind's lack of choice, despite Dinah's attempts to convince her that she can do anything, is made clear (see Chapter One, p. 23). In fact, one wonders if anything, according to Koea, has changed since the nineteenth century.

For as the nineteenth century viewed marriage: 'with so great an economic motive involved in marriage...and with opportunities of employment for women of gentility being negligible, women who did not marry were a class of unfortunates'.<sup>15</sup>

The desire to achieve a happy ending for her particular heroine (passive, good mannered, "genteel") commits Koea to a particular course in her plot development and characterisation. Thus, in contrast with the fairytale motif of Margaret Atwood's work which warns of the dangers of passivity and failure to take responsibility (as in *Bluebeard's Egg*, 1987), Koea uses the fairytale image to promote those very dangers as virtues and to evoke sympathy largely by triggering recognition of what is required of us as readers, as we recognise, almost subliminally, the parameters, patterns and precepts of the traditional story (which for most readers, is the nineteenth century revision of traditional tales). Koea's narrative has the key elements commonly associated with this, namely stock characters and situations, "right" outcomes and a combination of the quest and romance (in both senses, that is, adventure and love) traditions. While the characters become one-dimensional - like the characters of fairytales - we can still champion their causes and sympathise with them. The "grounding" effect of the comedy and irony means the story does not become childlike or, as Ian Gordon put it, "romantic fluff but...a sophisticated ironic comedy that can be both touching and on occasion wildly funny. Dream though it may be in its outer form, the novel never strays far from that firm grip on human reality and sharp powers of detached observation that lie at the core of Koea's writing".<sup>16</sup> While the second sentence of Gordon's comment seems to be

<sup>14</sup> Rachel Blau du Plessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Jenni Calder, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 58, cited in: Esther Kleinbord Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Peter Lang, 1986, pp. 50- 51.

<sup>16</sup> Ian Gordon, "Trick lies in the but", *NZ Herald*, 15 Oct., 1994, 3:7.

overstating the case, it draws attention to an important aspect of story telling: that there must be recognisable human behaviour as points of identification, whether or not the story is fantasy or realism. Yet it is these points of identification, when overplayed, which create the clash between fantasy and realism in Koea's work.

Where Koea's work is realistic, the points of identification present no difficulties. For example, in the short story "Good News" (*FRBC*), the central character, a seventy-one year old man, feels neglected and unloved now he is old and his daughter absorbed with a family of her own. He stops buying groceries, does not replant his vegetable garden and contemplates death but, gradually, the interest a publisher has shown in using his plans for garden houses in a book (this is the "good news") begins to occupy his mind. Early in the story he has written to his daughter:

A thousand times I've stood in the library and wished I could write something, some great idea that will touch the hearts of strangers and I will do it now, quite by accident, with my garden houses in the garden book. I had thought my life was wasted. I had no hope left and now I have some back again. It is a wonderful thing for me, this good news. (165)

This extract is an example of how Koea's stories are often optimistic for her protagonists. They are about overcoming despair and concerns which may seem trivial on the wider scale of things, but which deeply affect people all the same. The concerns are often about how the protagonists perceive themselves and how they fit, or fail to fit, into their communities. The stories are positive and optimistic in leading the protagonists through a variety of obstacles to a state of confidence and a safe place (psychologically and, often, physically) from which positive action can be taken. The reader is taken on the same journey, vicariously, through identification with the protagonist's cause.

In the less realistic stories, however, the points of identification are overlaid by precepts which we recognise from traditional story telling which trigger a set, or learned, response. The establishment of the heroine as good, beautiful, well-mannered and living in ordered domesticity, triggers a response of sympathy, for these are the characteristics of heroines such as Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella who deserve to be championed and to achieve a happy ending. The character recognition may even trigger empathy. The bad behaviour, bad taste, evil intentions of the characters opposed to the heroine trigger our dislike for them, and our greater sympathy for the heroine, as would fairy tale villains such as the wicked stepmother or the ugly sisters. The humour or exaggeration in the beginning of the story and the early establishment of polarised characters trigger our expectation that there will be a happy resolution; that the heroine will face obstacles and overcome them in the manner of traditional fairy stories. The kind of identification in these stories is a recognition of how goodness *should* prevail and the story gives an assurance that order is possible in a chaotic world. This assurance gives hope to the reader by implying that fiction may overlap into reality. The texts play on the compelling nature of such wish fulfilment.

If a happy ending is certain, there may seem to be no reason to continue reading, but this is not the case. We are drawn into the story by a triggered expectation that we be as amused and serious about the subject as the teller, as the telling dictates. The conspiratorial quality of the tone of Koea's work encourages a response similar to hunkering down around the fire, willing to be drawn into the world of the story.

Sometimes from far away, you could hear the sound of a door closing. Apart from that reminder of occupancy, the building, Bueno-Vista, remained steeped in silence. Insulated from the road outside by high exuberant trees, the sound of traffic came faintly, fighting its way through the greenery. Mrs Frobisher thought it was like listening to history or the sound of a newsreel about another place in another time.  
(WBV, 1)

Once hooked by the beginning, the plot takes us on a circuitous route, unlike the chronological structure of traditional stories, so that we read on for the enjoyment of what is different in Koea's stories: her idiosyncrasies revealed in the humour and ironies, the twists and turns of the plot, the beguiling language of the narrative. These become the incentive to read on as the narrative leads us by the tantalising means of delayed revelation to discover both the depths of duplicity from which the heroine is in retreat and how - or whether - (since suspense requires us to entertain, if momentarily, the prospect of disaster) she will overcome her afflictions.

The level on which the happy endings fail to satisfy is where the contradictions, caused by the clash between fantasy and realism, cause suspicion of a "hidden agenda", namely, that the marginalised heroine is to be championed even against all reason. This is the point at which the indulgence of the polarisation of narrative and character begins to falter. Where exaggeration and self-pity seem overdone we experience a resistance to our manipulation into sympathy with the heroine and the values which are placed around her; a resistance caused by the increasing impression that the work is sentimental and falsely optimistic and, therefore, morally flawed and that we have been manipulated into believing in it, if temporarily.

The remainder of the chapter will, with particular reference to the first three novels, demonstrate how Koea constructs the "cardboard" reality of her happy-ending stories and how she encourages the reader to suspend disbelief and how, in the final analysis, her efforts are undermined where the "fairytale" is asserted over sterner reality.

The stories "Mrs Pratt Goes to China" and "A Rustle in the Undergrowth" (discussed above) prepare us for the plots of the four novels and for the six "widow" stories in the second collection of short stories, containing as they do the pain of sudden and unexpected isolation from society and, consequently, from a sense of self on the one hand, and the triumph of rediscovered freedom and a new independent or recovered identity on the other. Since both short stories have very different outcomes and

approaches to their topic, they also prepare us for two different ways of dealing with reality. That we recognise the theme of the chaos or disjunction of self as a common concern of serious women writers lulls us, initially, into believing that Koea has similar aims in exploring this condition. Annette Kolodny found this theme recurring in contemporary women's writing of the sixties and seventies in which she found the female characters invested with "reflexive perceptions," a habit of mind that, itself, becomes a repeated stylistic device, as character after character is depicted discovering herself or finding some part of herself in activities she has not planned or in situations she cannot fully comprehend."<sup>17</sup>

This theme is evident from the beginning of Koea's first novel, *The Grandiflora Tree*, overlaid with imagery we recognise from the traditional story. Thus, the disjunction of self, the chaos following widowhood, is reflected in the traditional metaphor of a storm:

In the ensuing days there was more thunder and lightning, unseasonal everybody said, and it reverberated and flashed through the empty nights...Mrs Crichton stood in the darkness as one night became many and watched storms roll across the wide sky. Lightning bloomed violently at the windows, lit her face, and she stood there throughout this night watch like someone who awaits punishment, or who is being punished.

The image is extended to the traditional associations of penance and atonement:

Filled with terror and wonder, Bernadette Crichton took up her chastening position at the bedroom windows at the first roll of thunder, the initial glimmer of lightning over the sea and waited each night for the benediction of later rain. This came softly and relentlessly, often as morning dawned, like tears.

The chaos, significantly, affects the house in which she seeks shelter from the intrusions of the outside world:

Once, when the night's lightning brought a gale with it, a downpipe and some guttering clattered from the upper storey with a sound like gunshots but by that time Mrs Crichton was past all fear. (9)

In this way the turmoil of the storm which batters the protecting house is seen to reflect the character's inner turmoil and to echo her perception of her situation and influence its eventual resolution. It also influences the reader to sympathise with the heroine who is clearly in a state of chaos or disjunction of self; a situation she has not foreseen.

The story moves backward and forward in time, gradually revealing

---

<sup>17</sup>Annette Kolodny, "Some Notes on Defining a Feminist Literary Criticism", *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 1975, p.79.

obstacles the heroine must overcome and building suspense as the threats become more insistent. The damage the heroine has suffered in the past gains her sympathy as more is revealed and the approach of a happy conclusion seems to recede and then reappear. It is quite quickly established that the heroine has been like a bird in a gilded cage, the traditional image of the married woman. Mrs Crichton (significantly so-named throughout) realises that her husband Charlie spoke to her as to a caged bird: "How's my treasure, how's my darling..." (60) as she observes "the screams of confined and battered old birds" (61) on a visit to the zoo. Such revelations strengthen the reader's sense of injustice which develops parallel with that of the heroine, and encourages the reader to look forward to a just outcome.

Bernadette realises more about what Charlie was really like as she reads his diaries and remembers past events, and moves from chaos to order by a slow process accompanied by imagery of light and dark, the seasons, the house (which wraps its kindly arms about her) and of the garden. The spruce tree by the gate dies and its skeleton-like appearance was "petrified into a strange, sharp and formalised convention that encompassed Mrs Crichton's entire recent experience" (80). The widow very carefully orders her days "...clinging to the faint idea that with these small outward aspects of orderliness so might orderliness fall upon greater issues and more telling marks of chaos and disarray" (117). The imagery intensifies, with her room like a chamber in a tower and a cell, the furniture like beasts and ogres, her bed like a ship, the bedroom like a rookery. There also are glimpses of her true nature: witty and funny, and for a while she becomes "Bernadette", no longer "Mrs Crichton", as she runs up steps to visit new friends.

Koea deliberately encourages our sympathy by surprise revelations. We learn that Bernadette was nineteen when she married the much older Charlie who interviewed her for a job at his office, disregarding her qualifications and scrutinising her appearance under an anglepoise lamp. We realise the grotesquery of his actions at the same time Bernadette sees them for what they were. "'Yes,' he said, 'you'll do very nicely, very nicely indeed'" (158) for, on reading the diaries, she discovers that she was merely a replacement for Elizabeth whom Charlie loved and lost. That Doreen, his mistress, arrives on the doorstep and invades the house at least once a year, reveals a trait of Charlie's character which becomes clear to the reader through the discovery of the diaries and confirms what Bernadette has already suspected. The final revelation is one of unexpected superb aggression when we discover that Bernadette had taken Charlie's advice:

'Don't ever let them take me away, Bernadette, and put me together again. Don't let them hack me about. Promise me, promise me. Don't let me get old and ghastly. Don't let me be sewn up, Bernadette. If you ever find me and I'm dying let me go, darling. Don't let me ever be an old fool. Let me go.' That was what he used to say so she sat there, holding his hand, till she heard the last rattle of air in his throat and then she ran like the wind to the house, to the telephone. (187)

So, in this instance, the heroine's passivity has become a weapon, for she has triumphed by her lack of action, becoming at once the obedient wife and the avenging wronged wife.

The ending, therefore, has a sense of justice as innocent young wife triumphs over manipulative and selfish husband, and there are hints that Bernadette is discovering a new sense of self. She gains strength from her son with "the thought of that tall boy waiting for her like a reassurance of a second hunter's presence with a bigger gun and better bullets on a distant hilltop" (56) suggesting that she sees herself as a hunter now, no longer helpless prey although, since her son has a "bigger gun and better bullets" her dependence on men remains. She has rescued herself from her marriage, and although the reader doesn't learn this until later, it has occurred before the book begins. After her husband's death she remains in the house, becoming the princess in the tower, suggesting she requires rescue from outside. Her new knowledge of her situation offers hope for the future, yet when the book ends she is still in retreat in the house. A satisfactory outcome would depend upon what Annette Kolodny terms "inversion" where traditional stereotyped characters or images are turned around to reveal their hidden reality. Bernadette is not the stereotypical widow, nor is Charlie the husband he is supposed by others to be, nor is their marriage the sanctuary or support of conventional imagery, yet there is another inversion of reality in this book. The fairy story of the present in which Bernadette becomes the romantic heroine, or princess in the tower, is placed over the grim reality of her past. The fairy story view of the heroine is asserted as Bernadette continues to over-dramatise her situation and wallow in self-pity.

The heavy layering of imagery in this novel, the conversations with the blue teddy bear, the idiosyncracies of the protagonist, the repetitions of the sympathy letters, can be seen as cloying, but what is achieved is a perception of the social status of women, expressed in a kind of language with which readers will be familiar, when people express their concerns in melodramatic ways in order to put them, by a kind of reverse psychology, into perspective. Thus, when our suspension of disbelief is stretched to the limit, we may be lulled back again. The elements of melodrama and exaggeration in the book can be balanced against realism in the portrayal of women's experience of social conventions and of their subjugation of self to these conventions for the sake of form. The use of traditional imagery of weather, the seasons, the fairytale princess in the tower and the bird in the gilded cage gives gentle emphasis to the themes and, with the delayed revelation technique, builds up the reader's sense of injustice as, layer by layer, it simultaneously explains and clarifies the protagonist's undeservedly ignominious position, which makes the resolution all the more satisfactory and may persuade us to put our doubts aside.

This novel can be seen as a working-out of the themes which are developed further in later work. Here is the first inkling that Koea's fairytale has a deeper message: that the wish fulfilment, embodied in the romantic heroine, has a valid claim on reality. The widow heroine in Koea's work may be compared to the orphan, "the type-figure of the nineteenth century" who symbolically expressed "the decline of social and

moral certainties".<sup>18</sup> The "basic fantasy...of persecution" in these orphan stories in which "the heroine is threatened and finally gains power" is like that of Koea's novels because in all of them too "the threat is related to social status: economic difficulty, loss of caste, loneliness, not being loved, uselessness, loss of place in society".<sup>19</sup> Koea's widow heroine can be paralleled with a character who initially appears different, that is the fallen woman figure of the 1860s, yet is "someone with whom the reader will identify, who suffers not because she is wrong but because everyone else is: society is twisted and men are villains".<sup>20</sup> There is certainly a very strong sense in Koea's widow stories of the injustice of society to women on their own, and social customs and petty manners are shown to be insensitive and damaging to the individual, while the power of men must be carefully circumvented. The first novel details the social isolation the widow suffers and the intrusion of others who now see fit to give her unsolicited advice, and who patronise her and speak in euphemisms. She is now devoid of the protection of the social convention of marriage, and in her telephone conversations to her son he tells her "[t]he world is a jungle, Mother, and you are in it now" (34).

To show how threatening society is to women, images of violence begin the second novel, *Staying Home and Being Rotten*, with descriptions of recent murderous events in the neighbourhood. When Rosalind's friend Dinah phones she begins: "'Hello? Rosie? I just wondered if you were alive.'" (1) The innocent idiom of the enquiry takes on a sinister note in this context; part of the balancing of the humorous and serious discussed in chapter two. The arrival of the parcel from James which signals the possibility of a return to the situation from which Rosalind believed she had escaped two years before is also made sinister, for the parcel is "about the size of a hand, beckoning as deep water does to people who decide to drown themselves" (3). As with the death of Charlie in *The Grandiflora Tree*, the arrival of the parcel coincides with a change in the weather: "unseasonal rain fell, a sudden grief from an unfelicitous sky" (4). James' persistent phone calls later coincide with sudden electrical storms. Once again the turmoil in the outer world of the storm reflects the character's inner turmoil and her perception of her situation which in turn influences her subsequent efforts to achieve a satisfactory resolution. Like Bernadette who establishes a routine to keep chaos at bay, Rosalind sets out "To turn everything into an agreeable interlacing of order, prettiness and delicate scents [which] might make the recollection of James become a myth to be forgotten" (8).

The sense of theatre, reminding us of a context in which we suspend disbelief, is particularly strong in this novel from the first page:

The whole place, it seemed, had hushed itself in preparation for the arrival of James's package, as a theatre may be quietened for the beginning of a charade. (1)

---

<sup>18</sup>Sally Mitchell, "Women's Recreational Reading", *Victorian Studies*, Autumn 1977, Vol. 21:34-35.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, op. cit., p.35.

<sup>20</sup> Mitchell, loc. cit.



The word "charade" indicates that this is not serious theatre. In another instance the arrival of Rosalind's friend Ben is carefully described in terms which suggest the stage directions of an old-fashioned (perhaps an Oscar Wilde) play:

A millionaire has come calling at Rosalind's cottage. It is after Christmas, but before New Year, and she supposes he has nothing much to do between parties. The Christmas cards are still lying about, and she watches him, this neat and dapper man, as he walks past James's postcard and the untouched parcel. There are disguising messages from friends, though, to mask this postal squalor. There is also herself, like a well-framed but foxed watercolour, positioned in her own small parlour saying, 'How nice to see you. And did you have a good Christmas?' He notices nothing amiss. His own difficulties fill his mind. (20)

This has the effect of allowing the reader to see the scene like a moving image framed within a proscenium arch. The effect is one of distancing or alienation, in a dramatic sense, while also suggesting - since the narrative is closest to the main character - that this is how Rosalind sees her situation too: as unexpected and shaded with unreality. The sense of theatre builds to melodrama as Rosalind calculates her worth to Ben. Desperation lies beneath the restraint with which she explains to him her financial situation, and there is humour as she fearfully anticipates Finnegan who, Ben tells her, "sorts out" people who have been put into receivership. The reader champions her cause as the audience would champion the heroine in her struggles with the villain in a pantomime.

To emphasise the confined fictional world - the domestic sphere - of this novel, and to engage the reader's sympathy further, imagery of the garden is used to describe the heroine's situation and to draw a contrast between herself as a person capable of nurture and James as a destructive presence. The chill of the Christmas she spent with James in London is contrasted with the silence and tranquillity of the Christmas at the cottage with the "blue salvias higher than Rosalind's head" and the little cat asleep "in a bed of dried bougainvillaea beside the mint..." (43-44). There were no flowers in James's flat, only mould grew under the sink. "The telephone was the only horticultural item and it bloomed with spite and bad news, blossomed with contention" (72). Constantly, Rosalind finds solace in her garden and is calmed by the "affectionate landscape...a place in which it might be possible to be lost gracefully forever" (66). Her name (which Koea pronounced at a reading "Rose-alind") has associations of cultivation and domesticity, of the security of the walled garden. So are heroines of fairytales, pantomime and melodrama associated with the friendship of animals and the beauty of nature which offer consolation to their confined lives.

Rosalind also projects her feelings onto the music of the concerts she attends with Dinah, again adding a touch of theatre (or pantomime, farce, charade). "'Skriabin always sounds to me like people worried to death having 'all their nerves torn out by the roots.'" (34) Twice James is compared to the conductor of an orchestra, in

which Rosalind sees herself at first as a comic turn with a tambourine and, finally, as absent from James's "stage of chicanery, a minor movement never completed" (91). At the end of the book they anticipate a Mozart concert. "Mozart had a wonderful heart, even if it was broken, he had a wonderful heart. Mozart had a heart as big as the world." says Dinah, but, again in the manner of stage directions, the narrative announces:

The programme has been changed. It is *Music for the Royal Fireworks*. Handel at his best. The music's overpowering splendour is as eloquent and telling as a cold cheek, the tilt of a mutinous head, a sharp shoulder turning finally away from the last echoes of London." (188)

This signals a triumphant ending and there is a sense that the narrative too could be written like a musical score with rising and falling cadences, modulations and dynamics. The final sentence calculates the sum of Rosalind's existence: "Music and paintings, paintings and roses, roses and the cat, the cat and Benjamin, Benjamin and Dinah. That's all, that's all there is" (177). This echo of Keats's

"Beauty is Truth, truth Beauty, ' - That is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"<sup>21</sup>

brings the book to a close in a Perfect Cadence.

As in *The Grandiflora Tree*, this novel attempts to give the "fairytale" precedence over a sterner reality. This is illustrated in Dinah and Rosalind's conversations. Dinah believes Rosalind is making things up. "You have this tendency to kid people all the time...so it's no use trying these things out on me" (34) is her response at the beginning of the book, but by the end she has to agree that Rosalind's approach to life is the best one, given the messes her clients have made of their lives: "Why can't some of these people see their lives as verbalised and endured fiction, Rosalind, just like you?" (184). Thus, the novel endorses living life like a fairytale and that this is a triumph of wish fulfilment over reality, not a pitiable state like that of Katherine Mansfield's Miss Brill (in the story of the same name) who denies the sad poverty of her life by imagining she is part of a play on her Sunday visits to the park. The disparity between the situation and the solution which seeks to resolve it raises problems about the levels of seriousness in Koea's novel.

In this story, universal and very serious aspects of women's existence are set before us: fear of destitution and violence at one end of the scale, and fear of being a nuisance or a burden, at the other. Rosalind's careful rationing of her supplies is a familiar experience of women as the following quotation, used as an epigraph to a Gloria Steinem essay about how women fit - or, rather, fail to fit - into economic systems, demonstrates:

I've lived in cities for many months broke, without help,

---

<sup>21</sup> John Keats *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

too timid to get in the bread line. I've known many women to live like this until they simply faint on the street from privation, without saying a word to anyone. A woman [without children or other dependents] will shut herself up in a room until it is taken away from her, and eat a cracker a day and be as quiet as a mouse so there are no social statistics concerning her.<sup>22</sup>

Rosalind is not in quite such dire straits although there is more than an echo of similar privations, emotional and physical, suffered by the heroine in all of the novels. Rosalind owns her own house and car (although she cannot afford insurance, electricity or petrol) but has severe concerns for her continued well-being, putting together sparse meals and attempting to maintain some dignity by mixing her own supermarket teas in the hope of passing them off to visitors as a more exotic blend. Additionally, Rosalind has, through her own romantic notions amounting to naivety, fallen prey to a violent man and, as a consequence, suffers illness, loss of self-esteem, loss of ideals, and financial loss compounded by falling interest rates and an economic downturn which makes her ability to earn money as she used to, through art and poetry, increasingly difficult. Her situation is clearly distressing, and arguably, one with which her readers would sympathise.

Yet, "Minnie Mouse plays Anna Karenina!"<sup>23</sup> declared the headline for Iain Sharp's review of this novel. This declaration could indicate that there is a tendency to belittle women's concerns as trivial and inconsequential, a tendency which Virginia Woolf has discussed in *A Room of One's Own* and which Dale Spender traces from the time of Aphra Behn to our own,<sup>24</sup> or simply that Koea's treatment of the subject stretches the reader's credibility too far, which would appear to be the case here. Despite the careful way in which the character and situation of Rosalind is constructed from the beginning of the novel (see chapter two) we are required to regard her dilemma seriously, and this, combined with Koea's efforts to entertain, and to suggest that the best solution to her situation is to live her life as a fairytale, creates something of a bind. This treatment could be an illustration of a tendency of the female psyche (which one critic claims Koea understands very well<sup>25</sup>) to make the best of things, so that serious matters are frequently made light of by the use of humour, to which the alternative seems to be debilitating anger or even insanity. The problem is that there is just enough realism for identification on real terms to be achieved, and the disparity between realism and wish fulfilment lets the story down in the end.

---

<sup>22</sup> Meridel Le Sueur, "Women Are Hungry", *Ripening: Selected Works 1927-1980*, pp. 140-141, cited in Steinem, Gloria, *Moving Beyond Words*, London: Bloomsbury, 1994, p. 199.

<sup>23</sup> Iain Sharp, "Minnie Mouse plays Anna Karenina", *New Zealand Books*, Dec. 1992, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Dale Spender, "Aphra Behn: A Case Study", *Women of Ideas*, London: Pandora Press, 1982, p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> Jan Pilditch, reviewing *The Woman Who Never Went Home* wrote: "Koea is demonstrably an acute observer of the female psyche and the human capacity for self-deception", *Landfall*, March 1989, p. 106.

Margaret's story is the most fantastic of the novels. Here there is, perhaps, less conflict between fantasy and realism since "past and present, dream and reality, love and loneliness balance each other almost pedantically".<sup>26</sup> The female protagonist of *Sing to Me* is in an even more incongruous position than the genteel Rosalind "amid the sins of the lawless lanes" (4), and cuts a more conspicuously melodramatic figure. She brings the romance of foreign places of traditional story telling (such as Peer Gynt's travels to Asia and his encounter with the bewitching Anitra). The gracefulness of her life in India is constantly romanticised throughout the book and used as a contrast to the crassness and corruption of her home town. Like Bernadette and Rosalind before her, Margaret has suddenly found herself in a new set of circumstances following the death of the man who gave her social status and identity. Unlike her predecessors, her story is perhaps more remarkable, her clothing clearly signalling her difference, as does her attendant elephant in the garden.

The story telling of this novel seems more adept and cunning. A major difference from the other two novels is that the narrative is in the first person. This has a number of effects. It allows Koea's characteristic "rambling" style or what Michael King has called her "circles of narrative"<sup>27</sup> to become part of the characterisation of the protagonist telling her story, while using the "delayed revelation" technique favoured by Koea. Consequently, layer on layer of detail is built up which, as in the previous novels, leads the reader into a deeper understanding of the protagonist and her situation and into greater sympathy with her plight as we gain insight into the workings and preoccupations of the protagonist's mind. It is clear throughout the book that the story is being told to a listener (or reader) from a retrospective position and, from time to time, the listener/reader is directly addressed:

If you drive into Hillingdon by the northern road, the one  
that goes along the coast, turn left at the clock tower  
by the library and you will soon get to the house where  
I lived with the elephant (13)

and:

This is a slight exaggeration, but I hope you get the  
picture (14).

The retrospective position is indicated partly by the past tense, but also by a kind of retrospective speculation as in:

I found this out later, by reading the paper, but nobody  
told me anything at the time. It was a mystery to me  
and I proceeded that day with innocence. I continued  
with my unpacking. Perhaps the people scented  
scandal, insurrection. Perhaps they seized at the topic

---

<sup>26</sup> Jane Stafford, *Landfall*, Autumn 1995, p. 162.

<sup>27</sup> Michael King, review ing *The Grandiflora Tree*, *Metro*, April 1989, p.152.

of the day. (31)

This has the effect of inviting the participation of the reader in the speculation and in the assumed reality of the story.

The accumulating effect is to draw the reader into the construct of the story. The pace of the storytelling is leisurely and calm, quietly building up the details of the whole picture like a jigsaw, never moving in a straight line. A number of times the narrative seems to go off at a tangent, as tends to happen when someone is telling an anecdote and gets side-tracked on the way. So that in chapter three, interspersed with the details of elephant's arrival which is the main topic of the chapter, we learn about more incursions onto Margaret's property by the chainsaw-wielding neighbour, her phone calls to the police station, the state of the gate leading to the house, that there is a road gang working outside the house, the contents of the packing cases she was unpacking that day, details of the newspaper story which appeared later in the day, Margaret's friendship with Stella who had married a maharaja, their visits to London and what happened to Stella when her maharaja died, how Margaret is frightened by the sound of machinery, how her mother had sealed up her packing cases, the discovery of the volume of the Duchess of Windsor's memoirs in one of the boxes, an insight into the psychology of circus elephants, the nature of people in small cities who "still follow fire engines", Margaret's miscarriage outside Kirkcaldie and Stains department store in Wellington and how her parents reacted to this event, the background of the elephant and how he came to be left behind by the circus, the discovery of soap in one of the boxes and a detailed description of the bathroom and reminiscences of a maharaja's pool which has the same atmosphere, more about the complaints she has made to the police about her neighbour and the police visit to investigate her complaint, the apparent collusion of the police with the neighbour, her subsequent phone call to her lawyer and his interest in any riches she may find while unpacking her mother's boxes, his promise to get her a guard dog - all of which finally brings the story to the reason for the elephant's arrival. Over the top of all these events is layered Margaret's emotional responses to them, or the associations she places on them. For instance, the blue and white speckled cast-iron casseroles she unpacks "seemed to squat on the floor like friendly gnomes", and she adds: "If you live in a house too long alone you begin to invest inanimate objects with a humanness that could be a sign of loneliness" (26). This becomes a little cloying at times, but it is balanced by humour as in: "I put it down to too much imagination, too great a love of poetry, too much bending over trunks with blood running to my head" (30). The chapter ends with Margaret washing the elephant and establishing a rapport with him and, to calm him, sitting down to read him her story about how she went to India. There follow fifteen pages of italic script, being the story she has written down for the holy man from Agra who Ranji had brought to help her over a nervous breakdown.

The storytelling then, weaves a kind of magical web with its circuitous narrative, its layering of details and their emotional associations and its enticing glimpses of what the whole story might eventually reveal. There is also a kind of poetry, a beguiling rhythm in the language as in the part of the chapter which leads up to the

reading of the story written in the ivory book:

My voice rises and falls, my sibilance whispers in the gathering dusk, and the *histoire* of the journey begins to unravel amidst the drifts of sow thistle, wild periwinkle and strappings of honeysuckle that bind the herbage of Mother's garden to the dark earth. As my voice ascends, thin as the song of a lark, I see again the black eyes of the holy man, irises flecked with gold, as he hands me the pen and paper.  
 "Oh, sing to me, dreamer," he said, and I began to write. (38)

This is melodrama with its seductive tone, romantic atmosphere and the use of the odd French or archaic word for effect. It is indeed intended to charm and entertain, to bewitch even, in the time-honoured manner of Scheherazad of the *Arabian Nights*. The accumulative effect is a musicality - with modulation and dynamics - even more pronounced than that of *Staying Home*. It is likely that for this reason *Sing to Me* was chosen to be recorded as a "talking book".<sup>28</sup>

There is a constant interweaving of realism and fancifulness in the book as if to give the fancy credibility. This is particularly marked at the ending of the book where, again addressing the listener/reader, the narrator confidently asserts:

You know the rest. You know all about the headlines in the papers. SHOCK ARREST OF CITY LAWYER. MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR EMBEZZLEMENT SCANDAL BREAKS. BLONDE FLEES SCENE AFTER BATHROOM DEBACLE: TWO CONSTABLES TO FACE MOLESTATION CHARGES. HER BODY WAS SO ENTICING, SAYS POLICEMAN AFTER GUILTY VERDICT - I AM NOT SORRY. ONLY ONE CLIENT ESCAPES FLEEING. WILY HINDU REFUSES TO TALK. FORTUNE INTACT, SAYS POLICE SPOKESMAN FOR PRINCESS-LIBRARIAN. SECRETARY AND STAFF CONFESS: WE DID IT FOR LOVE. LAWYER AND HAREM, STORY INSIDE ON PAGE THREE. (164)

This tongue-in-cheek conclusion which asserts collusion with the reader (and the general newspaper-reading public) in establishing the veracity of the story, entertains and provides a fitting and satisfying ending.

With application of rational thought, the ending of *Sing to Me, Dreamer* is highly improbable, and yet it is a story telling coup. That the heroine rides off into the sunrise in a train with an elephant and joins a circus seems a cliché of the worst sort. (It also reaffirms that Koea is saying, in a paraphrase of the song: "Goodbye cruel world, I'm going to write escapist fiction.") Once again, the desire for a happy ending has determined the course of the plot. This ending reads as a triumph and where else, after all, could this heroine go? She has left her life as a concubine and returned to suburban, small-town New Zealand where it is clear she does not fit in. She has no choice but to find her own eccentric conclusion, ridiculous though it is. There is little realism in this story with its anthropomorphic elephant and buckets filled with jewels, but it does speak to us in an almost allegorical sense, at a very basic level - like that of fairytales - about the

<sup>28</sup> Shonagh Koea, *Sing to Me, Dreamer*, Auckland: Wordplay Audio Books, 1996.

possibilities for optimism and right outcomes and imaginative alternatives for the individual to the limiting strictures of society and the predatory natures of those who would take advantage. The ending, therefore, seems to be an achievement which can be enjoyed for its life-affirming optimism, its fantasy, its fun, and for the triumph of the fairy-tale over the much duller option of submitting to the small-town values of Barry and Muriel Goldblatt et al, with their "ten-acre blocks...and....splintery reproduction furniture" (167). The ending has plausibility within the constructs of the story; this work of fiction which uses aspects of romance fiction and fairytale, has no duty to reflect reality, in fact quite the opposite,<sup>29</sup> and yet it speaks to the reader of a universal truth or desire. Furthermore, Koea's assured narrative and direct address, reminiscent of Bronte's "Reader, I married him", her assertion of an assumed reality with: "You know the rest" as if to move beyond the covers of the book into the world of the reader is adroit story telling. Although the epilogue indulges in sentimentality, the ending gives a universality to this life-affirming story by quoting the holy man of Agra who was brought to Margaret in India by the Maharajah to help her:

"...even the severed branch grows again and the sunken  
moon returns: wise men who ponder this are not troubled  
in adversity". (172)

Like the fable or the story with a moral, this ending gives a strong feeling of a just outcome, and gives the musicality of the prose another Perfect Cadence.

Koea's story telling, therefore, has developed in these three novels from a rather tentative beginning, gaining in confidence and daring with each successive one. (The ways in which the fourth novel departs from this pattern has been discussed on pages 71-72 and of this chapter and in chapter two.) The fairytale elements remain in the imagery and plot developments, and Koea's work uses the common currency of the romance genre to suit her own ends. That her heroines are always widows indicates a concern with the plight of women in this situation and that they all manage to achieve a place in the new world on their own terms and following a degree of self-discovery gives her work a faint echo of that of serious women writers. It begins to put her story telling into the category called by Rita Felski "The Self-Discovery Narrative" (see chapter one) which follows the process from negative female image, passive, alienated and restricted, an asymmetry of male-female power, psychological/economic dependence, to the second stage of opposition and resistance and a psychological transformation.<sup>30</sup> The second stage is never fully realised in Koea's work, nor is the first stage completely abandoned. The use of fantasy in the stories is not uncommon for serious women writers, allowing exploration of "substantial areas of experience that are not best approached using the

---

<sup>29</sup> This is what Nancy Miller calls the "politics of dreams" where "A daydream is perpetuated when it loses all chance of coming true" and "Woman's 'daydreaming' is a function of a world in which nothing comes true on her terms", in "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction", *Subject to Change: Reading Women's Writing*, p.36.

<sup>30</sup> Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989, pp.129-131.

methods of social realism" and indicating "a mode in which dreams, or metaphors, are employed to say something about social and historical or psychological realities" as opposed to whimsy or escapism.<sup>31</sup>

...the truth of the novel doesn't depend on facts...[but] on its own persuasive powers, on the sheer communicative strength of its fantasy, on the skill of its magic.<sup>32</sup>

However, in Koea's storytelling she has deliberately opted for the "whimsy" and "escapism" rather than reality since each widow is represented by the narrative as a romantic heroine requiring rescue and it is only to this limited extent that this character achieves "a place in the new world on [her] own terms".

Yet Koea is an adept story teller. Her work is an "act of imagination" and the means of narration gives her work the cohesion which would appear to be missing when its elements are separated. That we can recognise the parameters, patterns and precepts of traditional story telling is part of its success in championing the heroine. We bring to our reading a ready-made understanding of the "rules" of story telling and the willingness to suspend disbelief. We know that the main character will face obstacles and we expect to champion her cause as she struggles to overcome them. That she is inherently "good" is understood by her possession of beauty and good manners and by her quiet domestic occupations. We are comforted that old truths will prevail, that chaos will be replaced by order. The sense of theatre reinforces the traditional concepts of character and plot, while adding a degree of dramatic alienation, reminding us that this is a "cardboard construction" of reality, although some universal truths may be gleaned from it. The musicality of its language heightens the sense of theatre, with its rises and falls, its beguiling tones, its building of suspense, its triumphant endings. Yet the use of realism to provide points of identification with which to promote the fantasy of the widow made romantic heroine becomes questionable when it becomes clear that the stories appear not to be making a point about the futility of self-deception but affirming that passivity is an admirable quality which will be recognised and will be rewarded. Thus, the evidence that Koea's work is "unreal" and "contrived" overwhelms the evidence that it has a "firm grip on reality". The sense that this character belongs to a different era when, perhaps, rescue was more likely than asserting oneself, further diminishes the willingness to suspend disbelief. So the cohesion created by all the complexities of plotting and narrative technique which make up Koea's adept story telling, comes somewhat unstuck in the final consideration. Instead, the entertaining story telling becomes dishonest manipulation promoting sentimentality and false optimism: a dishonesty which links fabrication and truth for the purposes of wish fulfilment and self-indulgence.

---

<sup>31</sup> Flora Alexander, *Contemporary Women Novelists*, London: Edward Arnold, 1989, p. 61.

<sup>32</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa in *The New York Times*, quoted in Dipple Elizabeth, *The Unresolvable Plot*, London: Routledge, 1988, pp.12-13.





## CONCLUSION

The analogy of Shonagh Koea as wire walker holds true after an examination of the characterisation, language and narrative style in her work, and of its significant points of departure from the work of her contemporaries. Koea's work is clearly a balancing act in that it attempts to balance humour with seriousness, and fantasy with realism. When compared with the fiction of serious writers, the escapism of Koea's novels, in particular, is evident, mainly in the way the predicaments of the protagonists are resolved by an insistence on a happy, fairy tale ending. The combination of caricature, excesses in the language, and a tongue-in-cheek narrative tone reinforce the escapism of the work, as does the repetition of the marginalised widow character, made over into romantic heroine requiring rescue, whose concerns the narrative attempts to persuade the reader to share. The contradictions between humour and seriousness and between realism and fantasy inevitably upset the balance when the narrative attempts to assert fantasy over realism while requiring the reader's serious consideration of the romantic heroine. This study has concentrated primarily on the novels, but also uses the short stories to further illustrate Koea's experimentation with a variety of narrative styles and characters, the theme of marginalisation and the use of satire, seriousness and humour. All of these aspects of her writing give an indication of what appears to be a deliberate choice of style for the novels. The responses of critics to Koea's work, such as the one which provided the title, have provided a framework for the discussion.

The critical responses which pointed to similarities between Koea and other writers proved to be superficial on the whole. Glib comparisons with writers such as Jane Austen and Fay Weldon, for example, do not hold up to close scrutiny. Shelagh Duckham Cox's comment<sup>1</sup> that Koea and Jane Austen both appeal to a disillusioned nineties audience was nearer the mark, indicating the appeal of a return to a time of decorum and quiet domesticity. Koea's romantic, *House and Garden* appeal is superficial, and relevant to Jane Austen only as that writer's work is represented in film and television adaptations. Further, Koea's satire, balanced sometimes unevenly with fantasy, does not allow comparison with that of Fay Weldon who would never allow wish fulfilment as an end in itself. In fact Koea is reminiscent of Liffey in Weldon's novel *Puffball* (1980), who dreamed of a country cottage.

Bees droned, sky glazed, flowers glowed, and the name carved  
above the lintel, half-hidden by rich red roses, was Honeycomb  
Cottage and Liffey knew that she must have it. A trap closed  
around her.

The getting of the country cottage, not the wanting - that was the  
trap. It was a snare baited by Liffey's submerged desires and

---

<sup>1</sup> Shelagh Duckham Cox, *Landfall*, Spring 1996, p. 324.

unrealised passions, triggered by nostalgia for lost happiness, and set off by fear of a changing future. (5)

This reminds us of Duckham Cox's comment, and it is clear that Koea is playing on and appealing to similar "submerged desires and unrealised passions", "nostalgia" and "fear" in writing escapist fiction, even though it almost has the guise of fiction which discusses serious issues in women's lives.

Koea fails to qualify as a serious writer about serious women's issues by her espousal of the romance plot. Her passive heroines and happy endings are not making a point about self-deception as the balancing of seriousness and humour in the characterisation may have led us to believe initially. Instead, the happy ending asserts that it is deserved by such a quiet, well-mannered heroine who does not have to lift a finger, but will be rewarded by rescue. There is no satire intended by such an ending, for essentially the same heroine and outcome are repeated in each novel, as is the moral code which polarises the heroine and those who oppose her. Koea's work, therefore, has a great deal in common with the romance genre, which asserts the ironic longing for female autonomy in a state of female subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the early establishment of a heroine on a path of self-discovery, such as that outlined in Felski's pattern,<sup>3</sup> is not realised by the development of the story.

Such contradictions abound in Koea's work, and nowhere is this clearer than in the characterisation. The widow character, it seems, from her repetition and the establishment of a moral code relating to her marginalisation, is to be taken seriously. Yet she is constructed from the beginning of each novel as a romantic heroine and, as if to make this palatable to the reader, the distraction of humour is included. Unfortunately, however, this has the effect of diminishing the degree to which she can be taken seriously. Similarly, but perhaps more appropriately, the characters opposed to the heroine are treated humorously and they do not become a serious threat. Consequently, a two-dimensional polarised world is constructed, which bears only a passing resemblance to reality. It is Fiction with a capital "F", of the kind preferred by Miss Prism, in which "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily", but we are justified if, like Cecily, we find this depressing.<sup>4</sup> In what this study (supported by critical acclaim, see Appendix 1) has found to be the best work, namely *Sing to Me, Dreamer*, the elements of seriousness and humour, fantasy and realism are balanced more carefully so that the work is successful in establishing a romantic framework, or cardboard reality, on its own terms. It is a complete and satisfying construction. Where the balance is less well achieved, as in *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista*, the happy ending becomes a disappointment rather than a triumphant achievement because the realism of the sub-plot of the burglars, to whom the

<sup>2</sup> Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance*, London, Verso, 1987, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989

<sup>4</sup> In Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* Cecily comments: "I don't like novels that end happily. They depress me so much" to which Miss Prism replies: "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means" (Act II).

narrative has dealt a vicious revenge, has intruded on the fantasy of the heroine's story to such an extent that the fairy tale rescue ending is implausible.

The language of Koea's narratives deals also in extremes, and although it is entertaining, it also stretches credibility. Koea's stylism is obvious to the extent that it intrudes upon the text as it polarises the characters by establishing a decorous tone for the heroine and exaggerated coarseness for the opposing characters. The element of satire serves the dual purpose of both controlling and allowing the excesses, by placing a moral framework on the text. Thus, the narrative sets up the mockery of bad behaviour measured against the established norm which is, in the novels, the behaviour of the heroine. The dialogue has a similar function, supporting the moral framework by delineating character, often by contrast, and facilitating caricature and parody by mimicry. The purpose of the language, therefore, is to construct an artificial world in which characters, tastes, behaviours and ways of speaking are polarised. The imagery, particularly, makes this artificiality clear, even to the extent that there is a melodramatic mix of metaphors and other self-conscious poetic devices of which alliteration is one particularly favoured. This can be indulged only on the level that it is used to establish a two-dimensional world, promoting the heroine and her established moral code, whilst serving no higher purpose.

Koea's narrative technique, her storytelling, is the means by which she attempts to draw the diverse elements of her work together. Thus, she encourages our willing suspension of disbelief by establishing the framework of her texts as charade, or pantomime, and by calling up our stock responses to her stock situations and stock characters. However, her apparent establishment of her work as an act of imagination satisfies only until the intrusion of the third, or missing, dimension from her two-dimensional world causes contradictions which confuse the reader and create doubts about the narrator's stance. This third dimension, in the form of realism, puts the fantasy into a different light, for instead of merely indulging it within its own frame of reference, we are required to take it seriously and accept its precedence over realism. Thus, fabrication becomes "truth", and we realise that Koea is serious about her heroine and has attempted to manipulate us into indulging her passivity and to agree that a happy ending is her just reward. There can only be resistance to our compliance with such sentimentality and false optimism in the texts where realism has outweighed fantasy, notably in *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista*.

Therefore, this study, which set out to assess the extent of Koea's "wire walking" has discovered a variety of ways in which she overbalances or, to use Ferlinghetti's analogy, in which she risks absurdity. That it appears to be a conscious decision to take such a risk, to place herself in a precarious position on a tightrope of elevated prose and sentiment, is evident from the short stories which, unlike the novels, are more inclined to "integration" than "abreaction".<sup>5</sup> Thus, Koea's work, notably that of

---

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation*, Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1976, p. 46.

her novels, is indeed like a tightrope act which exhibits skill and daring in the use of language and in the patterns of the narrative. It takes the risk of falling from a great height with its excesses of language, elevated sentiment, deliberate melodrama and theatricality, and, thus, takes the ultimate risk of failing to please the audience. Further, the metaphor seems apt due to the elements of glitz and glamour in the work, despite glimpses of rawness, the sawdust, beneath. The employment of exaggeration and flights of fancy defy gravity, in both senses of that word, risking the undermining of what might, differently expressed and differently resolved, be considered serious in the work. As Bilborough contends, the work deals in contrivance and, even if it is not “straining to impress”,<sup>6</sup> it certainly exhibits a tendency to show off. It is an act in which balance is essential for its success. Where it is able to demonstrate a balance of fantasy and realism it is “exact and satisfying”,<sup>7</sup> but when we are required to apply the fantasy to a world outside that of its limited frame of reference, it becomes “unreal”<sup>8</sup> and contrived.

---

<sup>6</sup> Norman Bilborough, *Landfall*, Spring 1993, p. 330.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Stafford, *Landfall*, Autumn 1995, p. 163.

<sup>8</sup> Norman Bilborough *Landfall* Spring 1993, p. 329.

## WORKS CITED

### Primary Sources:

- Koea, Shonagh. *The Woman Who Never Went Home and Other Stories*. Auckland: Penguin, 1987.
- Koea, Shonagh. *The Grandiflora Tree*. Auckland: Penguin, 1989.
- Koea, Shonagh. *Staying Home and Being Rotten*. Auckland: Vintage, 1992.
- Koea, Shonagh. *Fifteen Rubies By Candlelight*. Auckland: Vintage, 1993.
- Koea, Shonagh. *Sing to me, Dreamer*. Auckland: Vintage, 1994.
- Koea, Shonagh. *Sing to me, Dreamer*. Auckland: Wordplay Audio Books, 1996.
- Koea, Shonagh. *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista*. Auckland: Vintage, 1996.

### Secondary Sources:

- Alexander, Flora. *Contemporary Women Novelists*. London: Edward Arnold, 1989.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Bluebeard's Egg*. London: Virago Press, 1988.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Bodily Harm*. London: Virago Press, 1982.
- Bilborough, Norman. "Fifteen Rubies By Candlelight". *Landfall*. Spring 1993, Vol. 186: 329-331.
- Blau du Plessis, Rachel. *Writing Beyond the Ending*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- Botham, Lindsay. "Little gems shine in Rubies". *The Dominion*. 21 August 1993: 12.
- Caffin, Elizabeth. "Pleasures of the past", *Quote Unquote*. July 1993, Vol. 2: 30.
- Calder, Jenni. *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. Cited in Esther Kleinbord Labovitz. *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman*. New York: Peter Lang, 1986, pp. 50-51.
- Carter, Angela. *The Sadeian Women and the Ideology of Pornography*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.
- Chanady, Amaryll Beatrice. *Magical Realism and the fantastic: Resolved versus unresolved antinomy*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1985.
- Chapman, Nicola. "Mythic anguish". *Listener*. 6 July 1996: 42.
- Clair, Daphne. Cited in: Krentz, Jayne Ann (ed.). *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

- Coffey, Anna. "Humour from ageist frame". *New Zealand Herald*. 12 September 1992, 2: 6.
- Cooper, Ronda. "Significant subtleties". *Metro*. October 1993, Vol. 148: 154-156.
- Cooper, Ronda. "Eccentric fairy tale". *Metro*. January 1995, Vol. 163: 130-131.
- Cooper, Ronda. "History repeats". *Metro*. August 1996, Vol. 182: 109-111.
- Corbett, Frank. "New Zealand gothic: speed reads: snap, crackle and pop". *North and South*. March 1989: 122.
- Dipple, Elizabeth. *The Unresolvable Plot*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Duckham Cox, Shelagh. "The Wedding at Bueno-Vista". *Landfall*. Spring 1996, Vol. 192: 323-325.
- Duckworth, Marilyn. *Explosions on the Sun*. Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989.
- Duckworth, Marilyn. *Married Alive*. Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985.
- Duckworth, Marilyn. *Seeing Red*. Auckland: Vintage, 1993.
- Else, Barbara. Cited in: Kroetsch, Laura. "Telling stories". *Listener*. 9 September, 1995: 51.
- Farmer, Catherine. "Staying Home and Being Rotten". *Broadsheet*. Autumn 1993, Vol. 197: 20-21.
- Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- French, Anne. "Little bit of ivory". *Listener*. 18 March 1989, Vol. 123 (2558): 50.
- French, Anne. "Tenpins flying". *Listener*. 17 September 1994, Vol. 145 (2840): 46.
- Gordon, Ian. "To read and read again". *New Zealand Herald*. 21 August, 1993, 2: 7.
- Gordon, Ian. "Trick lies in the but". *New Zealand Herald*. 15 October 1994, 3: 7.
- Halligan, Marion. Cited in: Elliot, Helen. "Discontents of the rich". *Listener*. 16 September, 1995: 50.
- Hankin, Cherry. "Koea's sombre truths". *The Press*. 26 August 1989: 23.
- Hill, David. "The Wedding at Bueno-Vista". *New Zealand Herald*. 29 June, 1996, 7: 8.
- Hurley, Jane. "I was completely bewitched". *Listener*. 22 August 1992, Vol. 135(2734): 48.
- Hurley, Jane. "Hedonistic pleasure". *Listener*. 21 August, 1993, Vol. 140 (2785): 44.
- Ireland, Kevin. "Nightscapes". *Listener*. 8 August, 1992: 50.
- Ireland, Kevin. "Staying home and being normal". *Quote Unquote*. November 1994, Vol. 17: 24.
- Ireland, Kevin. "Icing on the cake". *Quote Unquote*. June 1996, Vol. 37: 26-27.

- Jose, Paul E. and William F. Brewer. "Character Identification, Suspense and Outcome Resolution". *Developmental Psychology*. Vol. 20, 1984: 911-924.
- Kidman, Fiona. *The Book of Secrets*. Auckland: Heinemann, 1987.
- Kidman, Fiona. *The Foreign Woman*. Auckland: Vintage, 1993.
- King, Michael. "Fiction, flashy and otherwise". *Metro*. April 1989, Vol. 8(94): 152-155.
- Kleinbord Labovitz, Esther. *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Peter Lang, 1986.
- Kolodny, Annette. "Some notes on defining a feminist literary criticism". *Critical Enquiry*. Autumn 1975: 79.
- Krentz, Jayne Ann (ed.). *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.
- Lay, Graeme. "Staying home and surviving". *North and South*. September 1992: 126-127.
- Lay, Graeme. "Precious gems". *North and South*. October 1993: 130.
- Lay, Graeme. "A passage to India". *North and South*. December 1994: 190.
- Lay, Graeme. "Elaine's wedding". *North and South*. August 1996, Vol. 125: 152.
- Leigh, Jack. "Personality plus". *New Zealand Herald*. 12 September, 1992, 2: 6.
- Lemon, Lee T. *A Glossary for the Study of English*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Le Sueur, Meridel. "Women are hungry". *Ripening: Selected Works, 1927-1980*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1982. Cited in: Steinem, Gloria. *Moving Beyond Words*. London: Bloomsbury, 1984, p. 199.
- Llosa, Mario Vargas. Cited in: Dipple, Elizabeth. *The Unresolvable Plot*. London: Routledge, 1988. pp. 12-13.
- McLeod, Marion. "Armoury of bravado". *Listener*. 17 October 1987, Vol. 118 (2487): 70-74.
- Miller, Nancy. "Emphasis added: plots and plausibilities in women's fiction". *Subject to Change: Reading Women's Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Mitchell, Sally. "Women's recreational reading". *Victorian Studies*. Autumn 1977, Vol. 21: 34-35.
- Morrissey, Michael. "Romance with a splash of wit". *Sunday Star Times*. 30 October 1994, D: 6.
- Murray, Heather. "Myths of reason and culture". *New Zealand Books*. October 1996, Vol. 6 (4): 6-7.
- Neill, Anna. "*The Grandiflora Tree*, Shonagh Koea; *Explosions on the Sun*, Marilyn Duckworth". *Landfall*. March 1990, Vol. 173: 118-120.



- Newton, Elizabeth. "Review: Books". *More*. March 1989, Vol. 69: 146.
- Parkin, Jane. "Inner worlds, outer worlds". *New Zealand Books*. Spring 1993, Vol. 3(2): 6.
- Pilditch, Jan. "Riding into the sunset". *Landfall*. March 1989, Vol. 43 (1): 106-107.
- Putney, Mary Jo. Cited in: Krentz, Jayne Ann (ed.). *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.
- Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance*. London: Verso, 1987.
- Roberts, Heather. *Where Did She Come From? New Zealand Women Novelists 1862-1987*. Wellington: Allen & Unwin, 1989.
- Scott, Rosie. *Glory Days*. Auckland: Penguin, 1988.
- Sharp, Iain. "Minnie Mouse plays Anna Karenina". *New Zealand Books*. December 1992, Vol. 2(3): 7.
- Shaw, Helen. *The Orange Tree and other stories*. Auckland: Pelorus Press, 1957.
- Shields, Carol. *The Stone Diaries*. London: Fourth Estate, 1993.
- Spender, Dale. "Aphra Behn: A case study". *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them*. London: Pandora Press, 1982, pp. 32-42.
- Stafford, Jane. "Sandspit Crossing, Noel Virtue; *Sing to Me, Dreamer*, Shonagh Koea". *Landfall*. Autumn 1995, Vol. 189: 160-163.
- Storr, Anthony. *The Dynamics of Creation*. Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1976.
- Turner Hospital, Janette. *The Ivory Swing*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1991.
- Weldon, Fay. *The Fat Woman's Joke*. London: Coronet (Hodder & Stoughton), 1967.
- Weldon, Fay. *The Heart of the Country*. London: Hutchinson, 1987.
- Weldon, Fay. *Puffball*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980.
- Wells, Peter. "You must read this". *New Zealand Books*. December 1992, Vol. 2 (3): 3.
- White, Judith. *Visiting Ghosts*. Auckland: Sceptre (Hodder & Stoughton), 1991.
- Wilson, Tim. "A funny correct little girl". *Quote Unquote*. July 1993, Vol. 2: 16-20.
- Zeman, Anthea. *Presumptuous Girls*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1977.

## APPENDIX ONE

### A Review of the Criticism

Shonagh Koea's critical reception began quietly with the appearance of her first volume of short stories: *The Woman Who Never Went Home*. Two reviews appeared, one in the *Listener* (October 1987), and the next in *Landfall* (March 1989). Marion McLeod in the *Listener* review discussed Koea's distinctive style, her use of language and humour, and her themes, describing Koea's work in terms which were to recur in reviews of subsequent work: "extraordinarily distinctive", "relishes the deft phrase", "elliptical, wry, sometimes mercilessly funny", exhibiting a "trenchant and idiosyncratic glee". These descriptions indicate a delight in discovering a writer who is different and surprising in a number of ways. The source of the delight for the reviewers appears to be the way in which quite gloomy and sombre topics are cushioned in a very compelling and often unusual use of language (an interesting combination of the conventional and the innovative) and in which the treatment of the themes is suffused with humour. Jan Pilditch's *Landfall* review (March 1989) described Koea as a "startling addition to women's writing in New Zealand" and drew attention to Koea's "stylistic precision and wit" and her acute observation "of the female psyche and the human capacity for self deception".

Koea's next published work and first novel, *The Grandiflora Tree* (1989), produced six reviews published in *The Press*, a range of magazines (*More*, *Listener*, *Metro*, *North and South*) and in *Landfall*. The range of the reviews indicates the wide audience appeal of the work, although, at what could be considered both ends of the extremes of the range, the *More* (March 1989) review by Elizabeth Newton and the *Landfall* (March 1990) review by Anna Neill were considerably less enthusiastic than the others, one claiming an "obsession with widows" and a lack of substance in the "dry, delicate, understated manner of writing to carry it for more than a few exquisite paragraphs" (Newton), and the other observing that the "narrator's attention to detail" is at odds with the main character's indifference" (Neill). The remaining reviews develop the observations of Marion McLeod and Jan Pilditch above, noting the distinctiveness of Koea's writing, her keen observations of behaviour and her acerbic wit. *The Press* (August 26, 1989) review by Cherry Hankin calls the work a "most unusual piece of writing" of "deceptive simplicity" which shows a "wonderful command of language" in its "cutting expose" of social conventions, and which is "thought provoking" and "remarkably truthful". Frank Corbett in *North and South* (March 1989) refers to Koea's "characteristic wry and astringent wit" which does not give offence in its treatment of death and widowhood, and her "fine command of nuance", "well observed study of feelings and states of mind", "raw nerved perceptiveness", "delicacy and precision", and her "clear minded passion". The *Metro* (April 1989) review by Michael King describes the book as "beautifully crafted and understated" with its circles of narrative which "tease"

out "meaning and understanding" and end with a "gentle and moving resolution". Anne French in the *Listener* (March 18, 1989) calls *The Grandiflora Tree* a "tour de force in minimalism", "beautifully textured, elegant and assured...".

By the time the second novel, *Staying Home and Being Rotten*, was published in 1992, Koea was established as a personality in literary circles. Reviews appeared in all the major newspapers from one end of the country to the other: *The New Zealand Herald*, *The Dominion Sunday Times*, *The Evening Post*, *The Press* and *The Otago Daily Times*, and in the magazines *North and South*, the *Listener* and *New Zealand Books*. She began to appear in feature articles, the first by Kevin Ireland in the *Listener* (August 8, 1992). She was the focus of Jack Leigh's column "Foreword" in the *Herald* the following month (September 12, 1992), under the headline "Personality Plus". Leigh outlined her role in the upcoming Women's Book Festival in which her new book was listed as one to the top twenty fiction titles, and she was interviewed. In the autumn of the following year the novel inspired an article on her life and work in *Broadsheet* (Autumn 1993). In these articles, as might be expected, interest is shown in Koea's themes and their relevance to her own life, how she became a writer, her views of the ideas in her novels and her influences (she mentions Evelyn Waugh, and Joyce Cary, whose wilful character Gulley Jimson she enjoyed).

The criticism, with one exception, now becomes noticeably more effusive, less cautious. In his review in *North and South* (September 1992), Graeme Lay comments on Koea's reputation, established by her "stylish, sophisticated and often wickedly amusing short stories", and mentions that Koea is unable to meet the demand for stories for anthologies which have replaced the *Listener* as the vehicle for her stories. Lay describes *Staying Home and Being Rotten* as a "delicious comedy of manners and morality...rich in irony...constructed with great skill and its confidence and characterisation hardly falter...It is worldly and cosmopolitan to an extent unusual in New Zealand fiction, and it is very, very amusing". Jane Hurley in the *Listener* (August 22, 1992) admits to being "completely bewitched" by the book, describing it as "marvellous literary deadpan" and "subtle, unsettling and wonderfully satisfying black comedy". "As in Jane Austen the novel's frothy surface hides very real feelings of pain and loss. It's like lifting the antique lace counterpane and discovering a nest of vipers underneath" Hurley writes, finishing with: "...Shonagh Koea delivers nothing but pleasure to the reader". Anna Coffey, reviewing the novel in *The New Zealand Herald* (September 12, 1992), describes Koea's humour as "crisp, quirky, ironic, droll and rueful rather than wholly black. It is stylish, deft writing with sombre undertones about the relationship between apathy and violence. It has discretion and delicacy." Iain Sharp is a little more particular in his *New Zealand Books* (December 1992) review, entitled "Minnie Mouse Plays Anna Karenina" describing the setting and the characterisation as two dimensional and claiming that the work fails when Koea requires us to take the main character, Rosalind, seriously. He calls the book "an eccentric success" which contravenes "many of the traditional dictates of fine writing" which gives the book an "idiosyncratic charm".

The following year, 1993, a second collection of short stories, *Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight*, was published, receiving more attention than before (13 reviews, including one on the television arts programme *The Edge*). Koea appeared on the cover of the July edition of *Quote Unquote* and was the subject of its five page cover story and photo spread. The story, by Tim Wilson, commented that *Staying Home and Being Rotten* had sold very well for a local book: between six and seven thousand copies. It is also revealed that her paragraphs in *Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight* are "meatier" than those of her first collection and Koea is no longer restricted to the 3500 words preferred by the *Listener* in which many of her earlier stories appeared. Wilson refers to Koea's stories as "polite, ornate and nasty tales", echoing the comments on her language and themes made by reviewers thus far, and observing that: "Much of what Koea writes is informed by this general rule: individuals can, whether intentionally or not, behave in a beastly fashion toward each other..." and noting the importance of "courtesy, tact and decorum" to Koea, who states that her liking for antiques, silks, good food and artifacts is "a form of mental and physical discipline to cling not so much to correctness as niceties" and that humour "helps deaden" the worst effects of ghastly behaviour. These beliefs underlie the use of language, settings, characterisation and themes which make Koea's work distinctive.

Elizabeth Caffin's review in the same magazine comments on the development of Koea's themes, common to all of her works, noting a "more sombre mood" than *Staying Home and Being Rotten* in these stories which "include some slight but sharp satiric pieces: but pain, loss and depredation are unavoidable. The world is rather that of *The Grandiflora Tree*, Koea's first and harsher novel". Caffin claims that "repeated even obsessive subjects of attention give the collection a remarkable coherence. The widowed Bernadette Crichton of *The Grandiflora Tree* multiplies here: widows abound, both merry and melancholy. Here are the lives of older women, lonely, vulnerable, clamped to the past; but women who are also the mothers of grown sons, owners of property, possessors of taste and wit, who are articulate, smart and resourceful. Thus the widow takes charge of the story, tells it her way, wins the war of words against the claims of false friends (in "Death and Transfiguration"), against expropriating males (in "The Tea Party"), against past hurts (in "Good Order and Naval Discipline")".

Koea's language and style also receive comment from Caffin who considers that Koea "excels at conversation" and, as other reviewers have noted with her previous works, that Koea shows a "relish in the delicious manipulations of style...each sentence is a performance...sometimes she teeters on the edge of excess.. but in the best stories...she maintains perfect control". Caffin finishes her review with: "A noticeably articulate writer, Koea yet makes most memorable those moments, like the end of the title story, where the most important things are left unsaid". Like Caffin, Jane Parkin, in a review in *New Zealand Books* (Spring 1993), comments on the "excesses" of Koea's language, which Parkin considers to be close to burlesque in some of the stories in the collection: "The language and emotion are overblown...but here the sense of pent up rage

and impotence is all the more powerful for its emergence from Koea's confined fictional world". Over all, she considers reading the book to be like "sampling a box of good, rich chocolates...flavour and mood...linger satisfisfyingly".

The descriptions of food, flowers, gardens, antiques in Koea's works, which were previously commented upon by reviewers, often as simply providing a pleasant backdrop to the main action, are now recognised by most, as having deeper significance. Parkin writes: "The confines of hotel or restaurant dining rooms, at home dinners and afternoon teas, a companionable breakfast and a naval ball supper room are both setting and metaphors for the stories of love and loneliness and disappointment that make up the collection. in 'The Magic Way', one of the strongest stories, a lover's grief and loss are literally subsumed by his detailed compilation of menus, shopping lists and plans for an oak allee." Indeed, the very "niceness" of the settings makes the significance of the characters' actions more horrible by contrast and Koea provides terms of reference from outside her fictional world as a measure of the horror. Parkin gives examples of this: "In 'The Tea Party'...a TAB and Lotto shop are like comforting reminders of honest, everyday greed when set against the gluttony and meanness of the terrible Manfred...a glimpse of Robben Island, to most of us a symbol of the obscenity of apartheid, a 'small view of ordinariness' in the grotesque world of 'Naughty Maureen'".

Other reviewers continue this theme. Ronda Cooper, in a review of *Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight* in *Metro* (October 1993), makes observations about Koea's "sharp edged elegance" and "cunning wit", "her unabashed love of fine living" and "irresistible sensual appeal" and comments that "Koea makes the aesthetics work at other levels too. Characters and situations define themselves through the significant little subtleties - a sage green garden seat, riesling with dessert, Italian terracotta pots for the verandah. Achieving and appreciating beauty can be fundamental to survival. Koea shows there is triumph in an old magnolia, redemption in a graceful gazebo, renewal in maroon and silver paintwork". Graeme Lay in *North and South* (October 1993) also comments that "These may be cheerless stories, but they are not depressing. Koea has a fine sense of irony which slices through all pretence and affectation, and a humour which is as black and as deadly as nightshade. Yet she can also deploy flowers, antiques and 'dainty cuisine' to add a civilising counterpoint to the frequently cruel attitudes of her characters. The best of her writing combines the delicacy of Jane Austen with the acridity of Evelyn Waugh. No mean feat."

For Norman Bilborough, reviewing this collection in *Landfall* (Spring 1993), the balancing act between "delicacy" and "acridity" is not successful. He calls Koea a "wire walker", echoing Elizabeth Caffin's comment about Koea "teetering on the edge of excess". Bilborough writes: "Some nights she makes it across, and you have to admire her talent; other times she falls abysmally into the net. She's a writer who deals in contrivance. It's the tool of her trade - and a dangerous tool. In the best stories in this volume she works contrivance to her advantage. It's barely noticeable. But it makes the poorer stories phoney and unreal". The work which according to Elizabeth Caffin

contains a "vein of stylish comedy", contains for Bilborough a "vein of unreality". To Bilborough, Koea's "decorative diversions" become tedious, although he does begin to comprehend that "all the gardens and lovely houses and good eating are an insulation against the nastiness that lurks outside". He comments that Koea's "distaste for life...becomes downright malevolence. One wonders if she has a basic dislike of men". This last, rather petulant, comment is somewhat at odds with the observations of at least two other reviewers who have commented on Koea's lack of stereotyping in this work. Tim Wilson in *Quote Unquote* (July 1993) commented that: "Reading some of her earlier work often made you wonder, are men this barbarically shallow, are women really so passive? The answer of course is no. Refreshingly, those sometimes dowdy widows and boorish males who populated her work are starting to mix it up a bit". Graeme Lay in *North and South* (October 1993) observed that although these stories "are written mainly from the viewpoint of a lonely woman in her middle years who is often in the company of a reptilian man" and that "the men are predators with no redeeming features", some of the stories break "the bonds of gender" dealing with male loneliness, notably in the stories "Good News" and "A Different View". He also comments: "What prevents the characters from falling into the stereotypical (Sorrowful Widow, Aging Roue), however, is Koea's originality of language and dexterity with it. Her writing is cliché free, the imagery at times electrifying". The negative portrayal of male characters in some of the stories is what provides delight for some readers. Ronda Cooper in *Metro* (October 1993) comments: "Koea does something of a speciality in bullies - men who just steamroller their way through life, utterly selfish and manipulative. The most repellent of these bastards is the salivating Buntz Hall. He targets a young widow, confidently expecting her to be lonely, helpless and vulnerable. This story's memorable conclusion, complete with chainsaw, is one of Koea's greatest".

Seeming to pre-empt Bilborough's accusation of "malevolence", Koea told Catherine Farmer in the article in *Broadsheet* (Autumn 1993): "I think I've got a funny view of things, I always have had. I often find that I laugh at things that other people think are either appalling or you should ring the police about". For Jane Hurley, reviewing *Fifteen Rubies by Candlelight* in the *Listener* (August 21, 1993), the balance works. She describes Koea's writing as having a "sharp and funny chemical compound" and: "She is at her funniest and most penetrating when the very real pain of her overheated characters is overlaid with that dry, deadpan narrative. Astringent wit and ever present irony keep all excesses firmly in check..." and it all amounts to "purely hedonistic pleasure".

Koea's third novel, *Sing to Me, Dreamer*, was published in September 1994 having been written while Koea was Literary Fellow at the University of Auckland in 1993. By January 1995, *Sing to Me, Dreamer* had been reviewed in the *Listener* (September 17, 1994), the *Sunday Star Times* (October 30, 1994), *Quote Unquote* (November 1994), *North and South* (December 1994), *Metro* (January 1995) and various daily newspapers. Koea also featured on the cover of the *Quote Unquote* November issue with the subtitle: "The Acid Queen, Shonagh Koea - another year,

another brilliant, biting novel". The reviews are what could be described as "glowing" and three of them are written by well respected literary figures who are themselves published authors: Anne French (*Listener*), Michael Morrissey (*Sunday Star Times*) and Kevin Ireland (*Quote Unquote*).

Anne French points out Koea's story telling qualities. As if to make a contrast with all the "nasty, depressing writing out in the world" French imagines Koea saying to us: "Life's too short. Let's see what we can do with a little sensuous frippery and whimsy. Sit down, and I'll tell you a story..." (One wonders where Bilborough's "malevolence" has gone now.) French recognises the work as going beyond "frippery and whimsy", however: "She is not just a simple romantic, but a satirising moralist as well. She lines up Suburban Values, Deceit and Lack of Love at the end of the bowling alley and sends them flying. Moreover, she writes intelligently and well, with a Muriel Spark-y sharpness that adds piquancy". Michael Morrissey admires Koea for her "fine dry wit" and praises the "sensuous and pleasing density of detail" in the writing. He finishes with: "This is one of the few New Zealand novels I will look forward to reading a second time, both for its sensuous imagery and the music of its rhythms". Kevin Ireland describes the work as "acid, brilliant and hilarious" and comments that "Koea's wonderful trick is always to turn Normality on its head". His final comment seems to balance out Iain Sharp's "two dimensional" view of Koea's work: "The epic, interior adventures of Koea's heroines, as they attempt to survive the veniality, banality and treachery around them, take place in what seems to be a world of miniature and make believe, well outside the usual social presentations of ourselves. But the narrative and settings for her books are there to display a hard and glittering, jewelled element of satire. It is writing near to perfection, and this latest glorious work of fiction stands at least alongside any other in a year of very fine novels". Another rebuff of Iain Sharp's "two dimensional" view occurs in the final paragraph of Ian Gordon's review of this novel in the *New Zealand Herald* (October 15, 1994): "Dream though it may be in its outer form, the novel never strays far from that firm grip on human reality and sharp powers of detached observation that lie at the core of Koea's writing".

Rather than noting an "obsession with widows", Ronda Cooper in *Metro* claims: "There is a satisfying continuity with her earlier books, focusing again on a solitary woman's battles with the dark forces of suburban mediocrity". Cooper also comments "Koea makes the most of the contrasts - the exotic extravagance of Margaret's costumes and her memories of the palace in India set against prosaic middle-class ordinariness, the small talk of a polite ladies' coffee morning." Jane Stafford in a review which appeared later in the year in *Landfall* (Autumn 1995) also comments on the contrasts in this novel. "The novel sets up a playful, self-conscious dichotomy between the mundane and the exotic, characterised in the text as New Zealand and India, the suburban life of Hillingdon versus the mystique of the pink stone house in the maharajah's northern city, between Margaret the gauche daughter who runs away, and her adult self who returns, sexualised, exoticised, and bejewelled. Past and present, dream and reality, love and loneliness balance each other almost pedantically in a plot that

is comic and deliberately cardboard." Stafford, thus, sees the machinations of the author behind the work, calling it "a romance in the way that the universe it constructs is one of fabulous possibility, colour, disorder and the resolution of disorder. Koea's control of this often anarchic form is exact and satisfying."

The fourth novel, *The Wedding at Bueno-Vista* was published in 1996. Again, it was widely reviewed in magazines and newspapers, but this time there is a note of caution in the reviewers' comments. Kevin Ireland (*Quote Unquote*, June 1996) defensively justifies Koea's light fiction and notes that the chief reward for its readers is "in the writing". Graeme Lay (*North and South*, August 1996) makes a cautious comment: "More ambitious than her earlier work, it provides differing viewpoints, notably that of the juvenile house-breaker". Nicola Chapman (*Listener*, July 6, 1996) admires the writing as "exquisite" but expresses dissatisfaction with the ending which does not resolve the character of Elaine who she sees as a character in a fairy tale: "It would have been more exciting still if Cinderella had truly started to grow up". Ronda Cooper (*Metro*, August 1996) was also disappointed by the ending which sees the character's strengths unrealised, which view is also expressed by Shelagh Duckham Cox (*Landfall*, Spring 1996). Duckham Cox commented: "Koea writes so well. Grit hides somewhere beneath the surface of her book. But it's not realised. The novel's central character fails to equal in moral strength her own powers of taste and of expression. And that's a pity". For Heather Murray (*New Zealand Books*, October 1996) Koea's chosen resolution is also unsatisfying. "...the real value for Elaine (and for Koea) is in remaining aloof, untainted and above the philistine society. Is this a satisfactory solution? Is the only way for the meek to inherit any earth worth speaking of to withdraw to the periphery and leave the centre to the greedy bullies? If Koea advocates such a solution, it is a depressing end. Elaine's hinted 'rescue' at the end may or may not bind her any more closely into conventional society". Murray believes Koea should be "taking to the barricades" with her anger rather than "lulling [herself] and us into an acceptance of such a divisive, alienating and stultifying society".



## APPENDIX TWO

### Postcard Story

**Shonagh Koea:**

To: W. F. Howard,  
Suite 19,  
The Imperial Hotel,  
Russell Square,  
London WC1B 5BB.

Victoria Hotel,  
Port Elizabeth.  
9 July 1995

I wanted to thank you. Once you said you loved me, that I was exquisite. Where you left me the twilight is silvery in a way that touches the marrow of one's bones, and I sit here steeped in it, filled with a sense of melancholy that is almost like joy. If you had not done what you did, I would not still be here in this beautiful place with my beautiful solitary thoughts as clear and clean as strands of silk. The naked maya on this card lies, as I do, in a shuttered room, pearls in her earlobes. You taught me by your careless cruelty this art of exquisite solitariness. Even the stamps on my message have a meaning. They are like my fine, grey eyes ever turned away from you. I want to thank you.

Katarina.

**Maurice Gee:**

To: W. F. Howard,  
Suite 19,  
The Imperial Hotel,  
Russell Square,  
London WC1B 5BB.

----- du Maroque.  
16 July 1995

Howie is your name in my new hemisphere. The alphabet is like a trail of blood, see the stamp. Now turn to the market and try to find the woman...only *men*! They stare at me lewdly and pluck at my clothes as I pass. I saw you ahead of me and ran to take

your arm, but it was a wide-eyed American. He squired me to my hotel and changed into my western cow-poke there. How crude, you colonials, you say. Has no-one ever told you that your eyes are too close-set? I open the shutters. The sun is like a hand warming me and, oh, it is wonderful after your cold breath on my skin. You taught me; now I'll teach you. Do not think to run again. I am coming, Howie. Listen for my loud voice in your imperial hotel.

Kate.

**Marilyn Duckworth:**

To: Dr. Hank Rosenberg, Psychiatrist,  
Welling Chambers,  
Private Bag,  
Auckland,  
New Zealand.

Hogben Police Station,  
London WC1.  
23 July 1995

Dr Hank, I know you don't give up on me, despite your warnings. You are a clever man, but you see you are quite wrong about my William Howard. I flew here to London to surprise him. This playful Eros aiming his arrow above the sporting dolphins pointed me to his hotel. We had such joy in Port Elizabeth. I relive now some of the splendid moments we shared, two sporting dolphins, while moonlight drifted down as gently as snow outside the windows. Last night I arrived here jetlagged and chose to sleep alone. I would surprise my Howard in the morning, fresh, wearing my new crimson shirt. But I am too late, some woman, some lewd Kate, some kiss-me tart has pierced him with a deadly blade, smearing her lipstick name on the mirror - how unoriginal of her! The police have come to me, naturally, as his closest and dearest. Help me, please, Dr Hank. Help me find myself again. I think I need your infinite understanding. I can't see Eros's wings from this room, not even the moonlight. A kind servant of justice is posting this for me.

Katarina D.